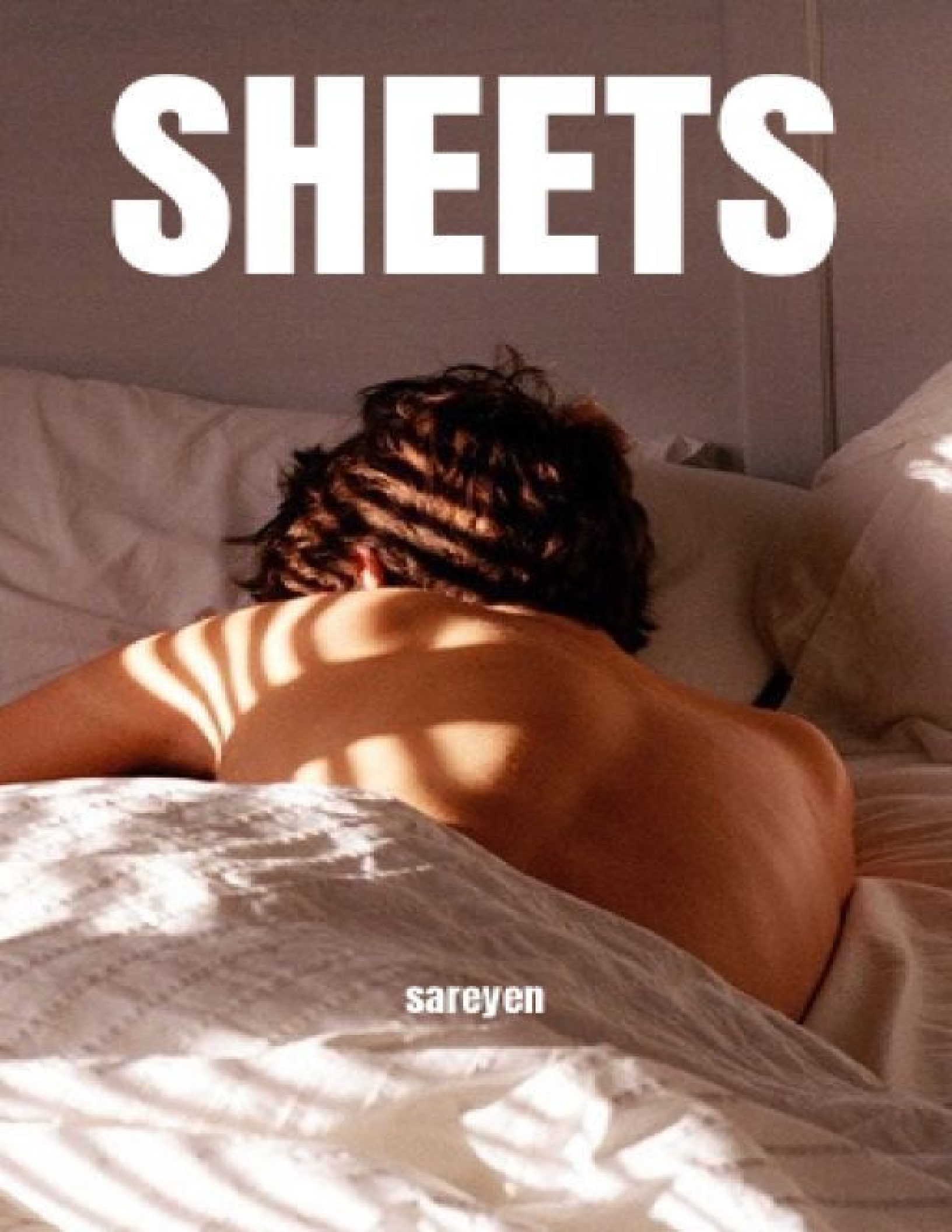
SHEETS



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1. ONE
2. TWO
3. THREE
4. FOUR
5. FIVE
6. SIX
7. SEVEN
8. EIGHT
9. NINE
10. TEN
11. ELEVEN
12. TWELVE
13. THIRTEEN
14. FOURTEEN
15. FIFTEEN
16. SIXTEEN
17. SEVENTEEN
18. EIGHTEEN
19. NINETEEN
20. TWENTY
21. TWENTY-ONE
22. TWENTY-TWO
23. TWENTY-THREE
24. TWENTY-FOUR
25. TWENTY-FIVE
26. TWENTY-SIX
27. TWENTY-SEVEN
28. TWENTY-EIGHT
29. TWENTY-NINE
30. THIRTY
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37. THIRTY-SEVEN
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40. FORTY
41. FORTY-ONE
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44. FORTY-FOUR
45. FORTY-FIVE
46. FORTY-SIX
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ONE

"It's warm," I thought to myself, a small smile on my lips as I snuggled further into the crinkled sheets, tugging at the blankets around my chest. The blankets were strangely smooth and soft to the touch, and folded in an odd way around my body. Grumbling and still groggy with sleep, I pulled at the blanket to cover my shoulders properly, which were slightly chilled under the lazy whirring of the fan overhead. The blankets moved in compliance, and I let out a content sigh.

Curling my body closer into the sheets, I frowned as the blankets slipped from my shoulders again, settling around my bare waist. My fingers gripped at my source of warmth, which laid heavily across my abdomen, making it a little difficult to breathe. Frowning as my movements didn't bring the blankets up, I peeled open my heavy lids to try and discern where the blankets were snagging. My eyes followed the path down my arms, pale even against the whiteness of the sheets, to where my fingers were gripped around the blankets, which looked remarkably like a human arm.

Blinking, confused, I raised the arm-shaped blanket, my stomach immediately growing cold without it covering my skin. As my eyes focused, blurry from both sleep and having no glasses on, I felt my heart stop as I squeaked, my body freezing as my fingers let go of the object in my hands.

It's an arm. It's a fucking human arm.

"Oh my god," I whispered to myself, voice quivering as my breathing quickened, chest beating wildly as I glanced around the room with my less than stellar eye sight. An unfamiliar ceiling greeted me, the smooth surface painted a dark green that was so different from the light blue walls in my own bedroom. The dark wood fan spun around, wobbling slightly with the labour, casting flashes of dark shadows across the room as it filtered out the light slipping into the room through drawn white curtains. Posters of cars were taped to the walls, the words on them too small to read, and across

from the bed was a desk covered with anything and everything. A digital clock perched precariously on top of some old books blinked *01:47pm* in red lettering. Clothes littered the room, some hanging off the desk's chair, others across the beanbag on the ground beside the window. There were some clothes strewn in a line from the door to the edge of the bed, ending with a pair of jeans draped across the foot of the bed.

My jeans .

"Oh my god," I repeated again, voice croaky as the arm around my stomach moved, strong muscle wrapping tighter around my middle. "This can't be happening. This can't be-" My quiet voice was cut out by a loud groan followed by incoherent, sleep-riddled mumbling. A hot breath fanned my temple, making me crinkle my nose at the stale scent mixed with alcohol and cigarettes.

"Please tell me it's not someone I know... Or is it better that it's someone that I do know? Either way I am fucked," I thought to myself, praying silently as I closed my eyes, turning my head to the left. The breath that had hit the side of my face a moment ago was now drifting across the skin of my nose. *One breath... two breaths... three.* As the figure exhaled, I opened my eyes sharply.

The first thing I saw were the pink lips that were slightly parted and blowing on my face, a slither of straight white teeth peeking out from underneath. There was a shadow of dark stubble around the lips, the a gentle gleam of a metal ring protruding from the bottom lip. My line of sight moved upwards to a strong nose, which was slightly askew in the centre where it had likely been broken at least once before. The nose was situated between smooth cheeks which rolled over defined cheekbones that caught the shadows of the warm weekend light, and scrunched up a little in annoyance as his arms pulled me in closer, finger pressing into the flesh of my hip. Even with their eyes closed, I knew what colour they were.

Because I knew who *he was.*

"Nico Beckett," I whispered, eyes widening as his name seemed to cause him to stir.

"Be quiet, I'm sleeping," Nico's sleepy, rough voice groaned, the sound reverberating through his chest, which was pressed against my arm which lay stiff between our bodies. His voice seemed to flick a switch inside me, because one moment I was lying there like a carcass, and the next I was up on my feet and scrambling to pick up my clothes that seemed to be everywhere. First my underwear and jeans, which were on the end of the bed with my phone nestled in the back pocket, and my underwear which were on the floor beside them. I then snatched up my glasses that wobbled on top of a spent tissue box on the bedside table. My T-shirt was on top of the desk, beneath what I assumed was the shirt Nico had been wearing the night before. One of my socks dangled around the edge of the paper bin, the other nowhere to be seen. One of my shoes was by the door, the other dangling by the laces on the doorknob. Quickly pulling on my clothes, my jeans still unfastened, my shirt on back to front and inside out, and my shoes unlaced, I ran out the door.

I didn't care where - I just wanted to get out of there. Out of *Nico Beckett's sheets.*

"Fuck, fuck, *fuck,* " I chanted as I ran, my feet taking me around the street corner. It wasn't until I was completely out of breath, feet hurting and chest heaving that I realised I was standing on my doorstep, my feet managing to take me back home despite my head being a complete mess. Banging on the door, I frantically ran my hand through my light hair, nails scraping the dark roots that were beginning to break through. The usually neatly brushed locks were matted with sweat and God knows what else, almost crunchy under my fingers. Glancing around, my fist still slamming against the wood panel between the glass inlay of the door, I swallowed thickly as I saw my neighbour Maggie staring at me with curious eyes under her visor. Her hands, which had been busy trimming the hedge that separated our homes, became idle as she tilted her head to the side, eyes narrowing.

Not a moment too soon, my fist suddenly met air mid-knock as the door swung open, revealing my older sister, who was giving me an amused look as she held her toothbrush between her teeth. Brushing past her and slamming the door shut, leaning on it heavily, I coughed as slapped my hand on my chest, trying to physically will it to calm.

"Mum will be happy to know that you're not dead in a ditch somewhere," Jamie smirked as she popped the toothbrush out of her mouth, wiping the stray white suds from the side of her mouth with the back of her hand, a little dribbling onto the front of her oversized shirt, which hung down past her waist to her mid thigh. The bottom of her loose shorts were almost invisible under the large shirt, which hid her slender figure under its fabric. Her brown hair was tied in a loose knot on the top of her head, slightly lopsided with the weight of her long hair, the towel hairband barely holding back the shorter strands from her face.

"I'm alive. I think," I breathed out, voice strained after running, Jamie's eyes alight as she grinned.

"I told her you were staying at Benny's house, even though you *clearly* weren't. You can thank me later, I take cash or credit," my sister laughed, her free hand looping itself around mine.

"Thanks," I replied sarcastically, my voice almost returning to normal as I finally regained my breath, though as the adrenaline began to ebb away my head began to throb as my mouth became dry, tongue shrivelling. I felt the sense of dread grow as I felt pain in another area, much lower down. It was a burning, bruising pain which radiated around my upper thighs and lower back and felt... deep.

Oh shit, shit, shit. Please tell me we didn't...

"My baby brother's first high school party," Jamie sighed happily, squeezing my arm as she gave me a sniff, the smell of toothpaste making me feel a little queasy. "You definitely had something to drink. You're also awfully sweaty." Jamie's eyes grew curious as her lips curled up into a mischievous grin. "Maybe you lost your v-"

" *I DIDN'T!* " I shouted, wincing with the sharp noise as my head split again, Jamie's eyes widening, before a large burst of minty air flew from her mouth as she doubled over, head shaking as she laughed. Her shoulders bobbed up and down as she sucked in uncontrolled breaths, tears springing to the corners of her eyes. My cheeks flushed crimson as I turned away from her, heart hammering painfully as I remembered the heat of Nico's

arm across my stomach, his fingers on my waist, his breath on my cheek. Nausea rose up in my stomach, and I didn't think it was because I was hungover.

"I was just joking, Wes," Jamie wheezed, slapping me on the back as she straightened, rubbing the tears from her eyes. "Oh my god, your reaction was golden. You should do this more often, it's so much more entertaining." Coughing a little after her laughing fit, Jamie's eyes grew softer as she ruffled my hair, grimacing as something clearly got caught under her nail. "But you need to shower. Be quiet though, mum's sleeping."

"Says the one bringing the house down with her laughter," I grumbled, pushing away the ill feeling swirling in the pit of my empty stomach, Jamie shrugging as she smiled. Stumbling as she pushed me up the stairs towards the bathroom, I tried to hold it together as I closed the door behind me, sliding the lock into place. Leaning against the stone counter, hands on either side of the white sink, I tentatively looked up into the mirror. I felt sick again at the mess in front of me.

Blonde hair, roots browning, was greasy and clung to my forehead, the back flat from where I had been lying down the night before. My cheeks were flushed beneath my freckles, and dark bags arched in crescents beneath my eyes, which were red and raw. My lips were cracked, and tasted a little like alcohol and blood as I licked them, my mouth parched. I looked like a mess, but even my appearance couldn't dominate the garbage dump of emotions inside me.

Turning on the tap, the handles squeaking in a high-pitched tone that made me flinch with pain, I dunked my mouth under the stream of cool water, drinking greedily. After I wasn't completely dehydrated, water slipping down my chin and onto the front of my crinkled shirt, I pulled it off slowly. I gagged a little as I saw a trail of red, bruised marks running from the curve of my shoulder down to the skin just above the waistband of my jeans.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," I cursed, hands shaking as I rubbed at the red splotches of skin, the colour blanching and then returning as I released pressure. Frantic, I grabbed a towel by the side of the sink and dunked it in water,

slapping it onto the red welts on my skin. When I pulled the towel away, they were still there.

"This isn't real," I shook, voice weak as I stared at the hickeys that littered my body, thinking about the most probably giver of said hickeys. My memory was hazy, and the only images I could conjure up in my mind were figments of my overactive imagination. Nico's body on mine, the ends of his dark hair tickling my stomach as his lips nibbled and sucked, his tongue slick as it flicked against my skin.

"No, no, no," I chanted, shaking my head as my headache erased all of my terrifying thoughts. Tearing my eyes from the mirror, I quickly shimmied out of my pants and discarded my underwear into the laundry basket, shoving my shirt in after them. Every time I moved my legs, my lower back ached and groaned, and the searing, burning pain flared.

"Don't think about it, don't think about it, don't think about it," I mumbled, almost pleading to myself as I stepped into the shower, only twisting the cold tap. There was a gurgle before the steady stream of water began to drizzle down my back. As the droplets slithered down the indentation of my spine, I felt the pain begin to lessen slightly. Carefully, my stomach clenched as I reached a hand backwards, pressing against my ass lightly. Pain tunnelled upwards, and I hissed, almost slipping on the wet tiles as my knees buckled.

"Not good," I said to myself, voice bleak as some hot, salty water mingled with the coldness running down my cheeks.

Really not fucking good.

A/N: Thank you so much for clicking on this story and making it through the first chapter! It truly means a lot to me that you would even be intrigued by this story enough to try reading it, and I hope you liked what you read (and if you didn't, constructive criticism is always welcome!) I'll be releasing chapters somewhat regularly (at least one chapter a week) depending on how many chapters I've written up and uni etc. Hopefully I would have been on top of my game and written a decent amount before I start posting, but we shall see~

Thanks again for reading, and I'll see you (and my boys) in the next chapter!

TWO

Pulling on a fresh set of clothes, opting for loose shorts instead of my usual jeans that would probably be a little too familiar with my tender behind, I carefully stepped downstairs, stomach rumbling. My head was still a mess and my heart was a beat or two away from an infarction, but my stomach was empty and gurgling. I needed food, and water, and probably some painkillers if I was going to get through the rest of the day. Jamie was already in the kitchen, quietly humming to herself with her earphone stuffed into her head, phone tucked into the waistband of her pants. She gave me a quiet nod, gesturing to the sandwich on the counter. I mouthed her a silent thank you, my sister curtseying in response.

The two of us usually spent our time like this, quietly communicating to not wake our mother up from her daytime sleep. As a night shift nurse, she was usually out of the house before we woke up, and in bed before we came home. She always tried to make time for us on her days off, but most of the time it was just the two of us in our house, unless our dad was back from an overseas business trip, which usually wasn't the case. The two of us had never minded though, and enjoyed spending quiet afternoons together. It was probably because of this that I enjoyed the quiet.

I felt something soft brush my feet, which rested on the horizontal slats of the bar stool, and peered down, a small smile breaking out on my face. Jojo, the family labrador, peered up at me happily with her long tail swaying in the air. I chuckled as her mouth hung open, tongue lolling out the side as her eyes sparkled, locked onto the shreds of chicken hanging out from my sandwich.

"Hungry?" I asked her, Jojo straightening her back as she panted, almost drooling on the floor. Shaking my head, I pulled out a strip of chicken, dropping it into her waiting mouth. Chewing happily, Jojo rubbed her head on my foot again affectionately, before walking around the side of the counter to sit by her bowl.

"You need to stop spoiling her," Jamie sighed, but reached into a drawer to pull out a can of dog food, making me scoff at her contradictory actions.

Pressing down the packed sandwich, the mashed avocado oozing from the sides, I took a large bite, groaning at the taste of something other than death in my mouth. Jamie stifled a laugh as as she reached into the pantry and threw a rustling packet of Panadol at me, the paper box skidding across the counter to stop at the edge of my plate.

"You look like you need it," Jamie said, and I gratefully popped out two pills, swallowing them easily without water.

"You seem experienced in managing this," I said, Jamie snorting.

"Most people my age would be," Jame said, pulling out a tub of ice cream from the freezer, digging into it with a large serving spoon. "Hell, most people *your* age would be too."

"I'm only 17," I said, frowning. "It's illegal."

"Says the one who came home hungover," Jamie said, snorting again, sticking the full spoon of ice cream into her mouth. Jamie waved her empty spoon in the air, running the metal from my toes to my head. "Want to share what happened yesterday? We both know you're not the type to be so..."

"Stupid?" I offered, Jamie shaking her head.

"Not that. Reckless? Or maybe just young," Jamie mused. "I don't know what the right word is, but you're not usually the type to break the rules. I mean, you're pretty boring."

" *Thanks* ," I said, rolling my eyes as Jamie just laughed.

"It's not a *bad* thing, I mean, mum had her hands full with me. It's probably a good thing you don't do anything scandalous." A slither of lettuce lodged itself in my throat as I sharply inhaled at her words, the leafy green tickling my oesophagus as I choked. My ass seemed to ache harder and my appetite weaken.

"I'm *responsible* ," I said, emphasising the word, more for my sake than Jamie's. "And no, I am not going to share what happened. Which was nothing anyway. I just... went to a party, had a few drinks too many, and crashed at a friend's overnight."

Friend.

Nico Beckett and I were the farthest thing from 'friends' that there was. Hell, I'm not even sure if he even knows who I am, even after we... did that... thing. We were on completely opposite poles on two completely different planets in far distant galaxies. I knew that he didn't know me, but I sure as hell knew him - everyone at school did.

A year older, having flunked Year 11 for reasons people could only speculate about, Nico Beckett was popular, for reasons that weren't so virtuous. He wasn't popular because he was the type that was generous and got along with everyone. No, he *definitely* didn't get along well with people, often brushing them off with a glare or a well-placed snarl when they got too close. And many people wanted to get close to him, girls and guys alike. Girls fawned over him, drooled over him, draped themselves over him. It was no secret that he was a prolific womaniser, and from the tales that I heard, he had probably gotten through a large chunk of the graduating class last year. It wasn't only the girls who lay themselves at his feet, it was guys too. For some, they hung around him like bees trying to catch some of the stray girls that lagged behind him. For others, they worshipped him like some God, a masculine deity that, despite his reluctance to participate in extra-curricular sports, was somehow able to pull the school's football team into the finals year after year. He wasn't even a good person, and yet everyone seemed to love him.

I had never gotten it, and I sure as hell wasn't getting it now. Not after we... did that... thing.

"Thing," I thought, the word sickly sweet in my head, deceiving. The word didn't sit well with me, but it was better than 'sex'. That word was bitter, and sour, and left me feeling sick.

Only finishing half of my sandwich, my appetite now thoroughly crushed, I thanks Jamie quietly as I pushed the plate away from me. Jamie simply frowned as she saw my half finished food, but didn't say anything as she peered at my ashen face, sighing as she picked up my sandwich and took a bite out of it, shrugging at the bland taste. Filling up my tall glass with water again, pulling out the water jug from the fridge as well, I slowly turned to the stairs to go to my room and... Forget. Ignore. Deny.

"Remember to come down for dinner, Wes - it's mum's day off so she's cooking," Jamie called after me softly, and I raised my glass in the air was I rounded the corner. Walking up the stairs and into my room, I hastily locked the door and placed the water onto my neatly organised desk, flopping onto my bed face first, groaning into the sheets. My bedding was crisp and fresh, unlike the crinkled, damp, warm sheets I had woken up in just a few hours ago.

" *Shit* ," I groaned into the bedding, slapping my hand against my pillow sadly.

This was *not* how I expected I would be spending my Saturday afternoon. Usually, I would be working my way through the week's homework, or giving Jojo a walk in the park. What I never thought I would be doing was having mini panic attacks in my room, my ass aching, trying to remember exactly what happened last night.

That was one of the main problems, but probably the least problematic out of the pretty devastating bunch I had somehow collected overnight. I could only remember snippets, and none involved Nico Beckett, his sheets, or anything in between those two things.

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" *Wes,* " Benny whined, slinging his arm across my shoulders, weighing me down. His words were already a little slurred, though he always had a slight lisp when he spoke. His green eyes looked down on me as I hunched under his weight, rolling my eyes. "Come on, man. I finally got you to come here, at least act like you're here."
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"I am here, and that's the problem," I grumbled bitterly as I shrugged off his shoulders, Benny wobbling on his feet as he struggled to stay upright without my support. Casting him a worried glance, which lessened only slightly when Benny's hand came to rest on the edge of a long table and nearly knocking over a vase in the process, my best friend wiggled a finger in front of my face.

" *Wes,* you're always so... uptight," Benny said, scrunching his face up, making me scoff. "Come on! We're finally in our last year of high school! Enjoy yourself!"

"I would be, but I'm busy being *here* , so enjoying myself is off the table, Ben," I complained, crossing my arms over my chest as I niftily sidestepped, avoiding the person tripping in front of my with a cup full of beer, the amber liquid sloshing onto the ground beside me. Some of the drink dripped onto the toe of my shoes, narrowly missing the lace holes in my leather boots.

Benny mumbled something incoherent to himself before disappearing in the crowd, leaning on people as he waded past to stay upright. Rolling my eyes, I sighed as I leaned against the wall, watching the people swaying and writhing in front of me. Even in the low lighting, punctuated with colourful flashes from the portable strobe lights someone had set up on the makeshift dancefloor, I could see roaming hands creeping up skirts and legs pressed between eager thighs. Some heavy drinkers, bodies also heavy, were sprawled across the floor completely wasted. Others, who were only buzzed, were running around wildly, loud voices only just audible over the pounding music that would have definitely been a noise complaint if the house had been any smaller and closer to the neighbours. Stuck like a fly on the wall, I fervently wished that I was at home, in bed and not here.

I hated parties, and even though this was my first one, the experience only confirmed my pre-emptive stance on the social gathering. They were messy, and full of regrets and mistakes, ones that I hadn't wanted to nor given myself the opportunity to make. The only reason I was here because, a part of me, wanted to experience it at least once before moving on to the next stage of my life. One week into my final year of high school, Ben had

managed to convince me to at least show up to a party, even if only to tick off a milestone in my book.

And now, I regretted it. This was *not* an experience I needed, and definitely not one that I wanted.

Letting out a disgusted grunt as someone barged past me, hand over their mouth as they tried not to spew indoors, I saw Benny return with a cup pressed to his lips, another raised above his head and dripping with some light yellow liquid. Moving next to me with a goofy grin on his face, Benny shoved the cup that was on his lips into my hand, blinking for a second, before taking it back and giving me the other one. I almost laughed as he nodded happily to himself for giving me the right cup, until I sniffed the contents of the cup in my hands. My nose burned as I inhaled, the familiar smell of lemonade masked by the clearly large dose of alcohol inside it.

"I'm not drinking it," I said, thrusting the cup back into Benny's face, my friend only shaking his head, pushing it back sloppily. With the force of his barely controlled hair, some of the liquid spilled onto my hand, sticky and sweet.

"Come on, just one?" Benny said, batting his lashes at me as he grinned.

"No," I replied adamantly, Benny pouting a little at my words.

"Wesley," Benny slurred, pressing his hands together in a prayer, peeking out from between his fingers. "For me? We've been friends for... Eleven years? No, more than that," he said, counting on his fingers with his brow creased. "Twelve? I don't have twelve fingers. I wish I had twelve fingers, then I could count to twelve." I merely rolled my eyes and hummed in response, though my lips quirked up at Benny's ridiculous words. Seeming satisfied with my response, Benny gave me a soft smile, almost looking like he sobered up for a brief moment. "Wes, please. Just this once? I just don't want you to finish high school and realise that... you didn't really go to high school, you know?"

Swirling the cup in my hand, the liquid whirlpool spinning in my irises, I gave Benny an exasperated look, raising my cup. Benny giggled like a

child, looking down at his hands and confused as to why there wasn't a cup there. Shrugging, he curled his hands as if he had cup in his fingers, and clinked it against mine, imitating the noise with his tongue. Snorting, I took a sip of the drink, wincing at the bitter taste. Benny stared at me as I lowered the drink, his eyes unrelenting until I took another sip.

And another.

And another.

And another cup.

And that's where the memories stopped.

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Shaking my head, as if trying to clear the fog from my memories, I rolled over onto my back. Sucking in a tight breath as my ass relented, I shifted to find a position that didn't send me flying into foetal position. The fan over my head was a clean white colour, not like the moody darkness of Nico's. Raising my arm, blocking the view of my ceiling with my splayed fingers, I let out a weak breath.

I lost my virginity to Nico-fucking-Beckett, and I can't even remember it. Not to mention that he's a guy. And Nico Beckett. *Nico. Fucking. Beckett.* If someone had told me that I would wake up in his bed after doing *that* with him, I would have been in hysterics. The notion was so ridiculous and so completely ludicrous that part of me still struggled to accept that whatever happened... happened. Every now and then I would laugh at the thought, only for the denial to be slapped in my face as my ass ached.

"I'm not even gay," I said to myself, turning over to my side, hand rubbing the bruise on my stomach. I had never been in a relationship before, with a guy *or* a girl. I had thought about it a few times, and the other party in those mental scenarios were definitely not sporting dicks. I had even been asked out by girls (and the plural is only because there were two), one when I was four and she wanted to marry me because I shared my lego bricks with her, and the second when I was fifteen and was forced to join a science club by
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my mother. She had been nice, and we had gone out for a little while, but I hadn't really been interested. When we first held hands the only thing I could think about was how clammy they were. When we kissed for the first time I just reeled with the taste of her apple chapstick. The thought of going any further made me feel a little nauseous. Disgusted. Now that I was thinking about it - *really* thinking about it - I had never really been attracted to anyone before, not enough to actually want to date them or even do... *that* with them. "No. I don't think. I don't... Shit, I don't even know what I don't know anymore. This whole thing is messed up." Groaning again, I rolled back onto my stomach, smothering my face in my pillows in a weak attempt to suffocate myself.

"What the hell do I do now?"

A/N: Thanks for reading the second chapter! Hope you're enjoying the story thus far, because I had a blast writing it. Comments and feedback are much appreciated - please be nice haha *But* , if you aren't, I have thick skin anyway ^_^

THREE

A/N: In case the seasons are confusing to some of you, I'm from Australia so I'm basing things off our hemisphere's seasons!

I was immediately regretting deciding to walk to the station instead of getting a lift with Jamie. Even though summer was waning, it was still sweltering hot outside, the city's power grid struggling to keep up with the demands airconditioning units were making. It wasn't a long walk from my house to the station, but under the heat it felt like I'd run a marathon by the time I was stumbling into the packed train full of other bitterly sweating public-transporters, my glasses slipping off the sweat-slicked bridge of my nose. The metal can was somewhat packed, with all the seats taken up and others standing shoulder-to-shoulder, gripping onto whatever sweaty railing they could get their hands on to avoid falling into others.

I apologised under my breath as I moved through the train to the other side, nestling myself into a pocket of free space by the door. I dropped my backpack by my feet to make room for others, my back hitting the hot metal as the last few stragglers pushed themselves into the train. From the corner of my eye, I could see the familiar colours of my school uniform blinking from amongst the crowd. They weren't people I know, which I was grateful for after scanning their faces that rose above their white shirts with the navy school emblem embroidered on the pocket. Their ties white and navy striped ties were loose around their necks, unlike mine which was pulled up against my first button. Their shirts were untucked from their grey pants, and black shoes scuffed and their socks scrunched down low.

I rolled my eyes as one of them let out a loud, raucous laugh and threw something at one of their friends, who caught it at the expense of a girl sitting behind him, the back of his hand slapping her on the back of the head. The boy didn't apologise, only laughing as the girl shot him a pointed look before moving down the train, away from the noisy group of students. Ignoring them, I pulled out a book from my bag, pulling the supermarket

receipt and make-shift bookmark from between the pages, folding it behind the back page as I quietly read my book.

The ride to school wasn't long, but lengthy enough that I had to keep myself occupied somehow. I tried to ignore the loud yelling of the other people from my school, some female voices joining them after the train pulled away from the next stop. Their uniforms were also dishevelled, their skirts hemmed higher and their top buttons undone to reveal just enough of their chest to make the boys in front of them glance twice. The dark blue of their somewhat frumpy uniform clung tightly to their frames, likely having bought a size or two too small to accentuate their assets. Snorting again, I turned away from the group to draw my eyes back to my book, but the words were muddled as my mind wanted to wander elsewhere.

Elsewhere being *Nico Beckett.*

I had pondered over him, the party, the morning after in detail over and over for the rest of that Saturday, and well into the night on Sunday. My eyes were heavy and I'm sure my dark circles hadn't lessened, but at least I looked somewhat put together. My hair was combed back, the sides neatly trimmed, though my regrowth was still growing out slightly. My complexion, always on the paler side, didn't appear as pasty and sickly as it did after the events of Friday night, and my cheeks were red from the heat. At least I *looked* alive, even if I felt like a complete train wreck on the inside.

I still couldn't remember everything that happened at the party, but a few bit and pieces had come back to me, even if they were only small fragments that hardly fit together to form a cohesive storyline. I could vaguely remember being pulled into a car by strong arms, the smell of cigarette smoke mixed with alcohol, and the *taste* of it on my tongue, warm and bitter. I remembered falling onto a bed, shoes and shirt off, my bare back hitting the soft mattress as hands hovered above me. I remembered those hands, rough fingers brushing over my skin and tugging at my jeans.

"Wesley," a husky, forgotten voice murmured into my ear. I gulped as the words on the page swirled into black blotches, my throat dry.

"Wesley."

"Wesley!"

My eyes darted upwards as a pair of small hands waved in front of my face, my hands snapping my book shut as my mouth popped open. The hands moved downwards, revealing a gentle smile and the navy of my school's uniform. Unlike the girls from before, the one in front of me was neatly dressed in her uniform, which almost seemed to swallow her petit frame up in the dark fabric. Her light brown hair was tied in a tight plait tied off with a white ribbon, the thick band of hair hanging over her shoulder and down the front of her chest. Her shoulder bag was held tightly against the side of her body, which tilted slightly to the same side with the weight of her books. Soft brown eyes, large and round, looked up at me.

"This is our station, unless you're thinking of ditching class," the girl laughed, stepping around my and off the train. Turning on her feet, she gave me an expectant look, laughing as I quickly stuffed my book in my bag and stepped out of the door, which closed in on my and nipped the back of my bag.

"Thanks," I said, offering the girl a small smile.

"No problem," the girl laughed, wiping her hand on her the skirt of her dress before stretching it out towards me. "I'm Sofia. Sorry for the clamminess."

"Wesley," I replied, wiping my own hand on my pants, Sofia grinning. "I also apologise for the clamminess."

"I know, and forgiven," Sofia said, making me raise a brow as we began to walk towards school. "I'm in the year below you, and Mr. Redman said that you topped the class last year. Told us that if we wanted to know the secrets to success in maths to ask you." I flushed a little at the praise, rubbing the back of my neck uncomfortably, Sofia's light laugh a nice break from the rough voice that echoed in my head.

"I'm really not..." I started, Sofia shushing me.

"He also said you're not the type to brag, so flattery wouldn't get you to spill your secrets," Sofia said, winking. "So I'm just going to ask directly - how do I not fail?" Sobering, Sofia looked me dead in the eye, the smile dropping from her lips as she turned to me. I looked at her silently for a moment, and it only took a few breaths of eye contact for her mask to crack, her eyes crinkling as her mouth returned to its natural curvature as she laughed. When I saw her smile, I found myself mirroring that expression.

"Sofia seems like a nice girl. Calming, natural, and not..."

Like him.

Not noticing the slight drop in my smile, Sofia waved at some of her friends who were standing by the entrance as we walked towards the front gate. Turning to me, Sofia hefted the weight of her bag higher onto her shoulder, looking up at me to make eye contact.

"I'm in Neil House, if you ever want to share your secrets," Sofia said, dropping her voice low and glancing around as if they were conducting some under-the-table deal at the school gate, making me snort back a laugh.

"Maybe," I replied, Sofia squealing happily, before giving me a brief goodbye before racing off towards her friends, who cast curious glances past her shrinking form, her plait bobbing behind her as she bounced.

Smiling to myself, I jumped as I felt a pair of heavy hands clamp themselves onto my shoulders, relaxing as I smelt the familiar - and mildly revolting - smell of Benny's aftershave.

"I'm waiting for your apology," I said, not turning around as I crossed my hands over my chest as I walked forward, Benny's hands still resting on my shoulders as he let out an exaggerated groan.

" *So-rry,* " Benny cried out, releasing my shoulders only to sling his arms around my neck, leaning his head on my left shoulder. Ben's naturally blonde hair, which he was growing out in an attempt to be able to tie it up, tickled my neck as he pouted. Rolling my eyes, I stepped out from under his arms, but he just laughed and latched onto me again, like a leech. "Really

though, Wes. I'm sorry. You did get home ok though, yeah? After the party?"

I paled a little at his words, remembering dark green walls and wrinkled sheets, but cleared my throat and plastered a bored look on my face.

"Yeah, but no thanks to you," I said, giving Benny a side glance as he laughed apologetically, waiting for me to open the doors to the main hallway, which was filled with students all reaching for their lockers to get ready for the first classes, or loitering around them with their friends to catch up whatever gossip they had collected over the weekend. I had been worried about school, for obvious reasons - sleeping with Nico Beckett was usually public knowledge, and with a huge blank in my memory, the thought did cross my mind that I was the only person in the school that didn't know the details about what happened - or didn't happen, I tried to stress - that night. Surprisingly, no one even glanced my way, nor did they pay any attention to me in the slightest.

Like always, I remained unnoticed in this sea of navy and white.

Loosing a breath I hadn't realised I was holding since stepping into the halls, I happily made my way to my locker, my shoulders relaxing under Benny's arms.

"Are you going to let go of me sometime in this century?" I asked, rolling my locker combination into the metal panel, the lock clicking open. Stuffing my bag into the skinny compartment, having to angle it in one specific position to get it to fit, I pulled out my first books for the day; maths. My lips curled into a smile as I remembered Sofia.

Maybe I could make her some study notes, to help her get ahead of the year.

"Oh? Is that a smile I see? Do you forgive me then?" Benny said, grinning. My smile immediately dropped as I rolled my eyes, elbowing Benny in the side, the boy grasping his stomach as he made a show of falling to his knees because of the pain. A few students passing by gave Benny side-eye, making me chuckle.

"Yeah, yeah, you're forgiven. Just get off the floor. It's embarrassing standing next to you," I sighed, shaking my head as I used my free hand to haul Benny to his feet.

"Okay, good, I was worried you'd be pissed at me for ages," Benny admitted, giving me a sheepish smile as he grabbed books from his own locker, but for history instead of maths. Benny and I were hardly in the same classes, as I chose more science stream subjects than Benny's humanities-laden courses. The only class we shared was English, which meant that the majority of it was spent with Benny looking over my shoulder to hastily scribble down the notes I neatly jot down in the margins of my text in his own messy scrawl, which in the end he can't read anyway. How the guy is passing all his subjects with decent grades was beyond me.

"Yeah, well, I've been pissed at you for the past 12 years," I said, holding up my fingers before creasing my brow. "Or was it more than that? Thirteen? I wish I had thirteen fingers." Benny punched me in the arm roughly, though his smile showed that he remembered some of his drunken stupor from Friday night, unlike someone else who couldn't seem to remember a big event in between two troubling ones that were painfully clear in my hazed memory.

Alcohol, blank, waking up in Nico Beckett's bed.

As I managed to remind myself of Friday night yet again, the bell rang as a chorus of groans erupted from the group of students still hanging around the lockers, people moving off to their respective classrooms.

"I'll see you at lunch, yeah?" Benny asked as I nodded in response, turning to my own classroom as Benny scuttled off to his, suddenly realising that it was across campus and that he would, inevitably, be late. As I stepped around a corner, halls still busy with students rushing to their classes, I caught the sight of a tall, muscular form leaning against the lockers, arms wrapped around a girl's slender waist as he leaned against his body, her legs entwined with his as she giggled, ignoring the blaring of the bell which was beginning to die down.

Nico Beckett.

His dark hair fell over his blue eyes as he leaned forward, a smirk on his lips as he nestled his nose into the girl's neck, the girl giggling again as she ran her fingers through his wavy locks. Half of his shirt was untucked and his tie was loose, his first few buttons loosened to reveal a slither of the smooth torso that was hidden beneath it, a torso that I could remember being hard and ribbed with muscle. His blue eyes seemed even bluer against the dark hue of the navy uniform, alight with darkness as his lips moved, the girl tucking her hair behind her ear sultrily in response. I gulped as I stepped past them, unable to look away despite myself, time seeming to slow as my breath stopped altogether.

"Don't look at me," I pleaded quietly, though I was unable to look away. *"Don't look at me. Don't notice me. Pretend not to know me."*

I took another step forward, Nico's face still buried in the girl's neck. The girl gasped, her cheeks suddenly flushing as he eyes fluttered closed. Biting her lip, her fingers faltered as she almost moaned into her locker, her head tilting further to the side to give Nico more access.

"Don't look."

Another step forward, and Nico's hands had tightened around the girl's waist, pulling her flush against him, his thigh between her legs.

"Ignore me."

As I took another step, Nico's head pulled back slightly, eyes moving upwards from the girl's neck meeting mine. Recognition flickered in his orbs as his brow furrowed, his mouth curving downwards as his arms slipped off the girl's hips, pushing her by her shoulders slightly. The girl gave Nico a confused look, breathing heavily as her legs quivered, Nico murmuring something too quiet to hear as his eyes dropped from mine, his face betraying nothing of what he was thinking as it relaxed into its usual, cool, disinterested guise.

As Nico turned away, reaching in his pocket to pull out a packet of cigarettes and a lighter, I finally ripped my eyes away from his form and quickly ushered myself into the classroom, quickly walking to my usual

spot at the front of the classroom by the window. Looking out of the scratched glass as the teacher scribbled something on the whiteboard in bleeding black ink, I saw a figure walk along the edge of the fence, a lit cigarette loose between his lips. His head flicked upwards towards me, and I immediately turned away, sinking in my chair a little to slip below the window sill, feeling a little nauseous.

This is the worst.

FOUR

After a rough, distracted start to my classes, I had finally been able to push away my unsavoury thoughts and focused my attentions onto my studies. Maths wasn't a real struggle, as I had covered most of the content during the summer holidays, and spent some of the time writing up some exam and revision notes for Sofia during the second half of the period, even though I wasn't completely sure if I would actually see her again, but part of my was hoping that I would. She seemed like a nice, genuine girl, and I wouldn't be opposed to being friends with her. People like her were easy for me to get along with - studious, easygoing, kind. Safe. She was the kind of girl my mum would be ecstatic to see me bringing home, the type of girl Jamie would immediately take a liking to and invite her out shopping or to brunch to gossip about me out of earshot. She was the type of girl that I, one day, would probably ask out on a date.

One day.

The other morning classes dragged on slowly, my stomach rumbling by the time recess came rolling around. I didn't bother trying to meet up with Benny during the short break, choosing to head to my next classroom early and have a snack there. Tables were arranged neatly in rows, each table seating two people side by side. The tables had long since been defiled with graffiti and etched doodles, and the underside of the tables were no doubt caked with gum crusts and other unmentionables. Now, sitting in the classroom alone, air conditioner lazily whirring in the background, I let out a sigh of relief.

Since our awkward encounter before class, I hadn't seen or heard Nico anywhere, and felt my muscles loosen with the thought that he probably cut class and left campus after his smoke. Maybe he left with that girl from this morning, or another one that crawled out from his posse. Either way, he wasn't here, so I was happy - it was nice not having to look over my shoulder and duck around corners to avoid the guy.

Ripping open a pack of biscuits and popping a few into my mouth, I opened up the book I was reading on the train this morning, a small smile on my face as I leaned my head against my open palm, elbow on the table. Time passed slowly, the only noise in the room my turning pages and occasional crunching noises, the loud buzz of conversation outside the door a muffled drone in the background. Halfway through the twenty minute recess, the door suddenly burst open, making me jump in my seat, the biscuit in my fingers clattering onto the table in a sea of crumbs.

Hair mussed back, a few stray strands falling over his eyes, Nico stood there with his dark brows creased, his blue eyes impossibly bright as he looked at me. My mouth popped open as he closed the door behind him, the frame rattling with the brash force he put into it, long legs soon striding over to stand beside the chair to my right.

"Don't you dare take that seat," I pleaded mentally, eyes flickering between Nico's form and the seat next to me. *"Don't, don't, don't, don't don't - oh, shit."* Nico pulled the back of the chair out, feet screeching against the ground, before dropping his weight onto it. He didn't say anything as he pushed the chair further back to kick his legs up onto the desk. I gulped as Nico let out an exhausted sigh and crossed his arms over his chest, the sleeves rolled up to just below the bend in his elbow, revealing the dark tattoos scattered across his left arm. The pattern rippled as his muscles flexed, his neck rolling as he tried to find a comfortable position in the stiff seats, settling down with his eyes closed.

"U-Um," I started, but Nico just snorted, prying open one eye to give me a withering look.

"What?" he asked, voice deep and gruff, his mouth turned down in a frown, skin pulling around his lip ring.

"Nothing," I replied shortly, the lie a little sour on my tongue. *Everything.* So many questions swirled around my my mind, but I choked them back as I swallowed thickly, my chest tight as I glanced at Nico's legs out of my periphery. In the quietness of the classroom, I could hear his breathing begin to slow as his head slowly dropped to his chest, lips slightly parted as he dozed off. The late morning light cast shadows on his long lashes, which

fluttered every time he took a lazy breath. Closing my book quietly and brushing the crumbs off the table with my hand, I tentatively looked at Nico's face again, wondering why he of all people was sitting next to me in an empty classroom, just sleeping the day away. He looked so similar to how he had looked when I had woken up next to him, the thought making me let out a shaky breath.

He really was just a little bit handsome. But only a little.

"Like what you see?" Nico's voice said quietly, a yelp escaping my lips as I scooted further away from him until my back hit the wall beside me. Nico's mouth quirked up a little, but the movement disappeared again as he settled into his usual look of nonchalance, turning towards me.

"Excuse me?" I asked, turning to him incredulously, trying to keep my face still as my fingers knotted together nervously under the table.

"You were staring," Nico said, a short laugh punctuating his observation. "Just like the other morning... Or I guess, it was the afternoon by then." Nico's eyes brightened as his brow rose in amusement, my cheeks blossoming as I shook my head violently.

"You're mistaken," I scoffed, my words a blatant lie, which Nico obviously caught as he grinned fuller now, flashing a small view of his teeth. Coughing uncomfortably, I turned away from Nico's face to stare at the muddled words of my book. Sucking in a strained breath, I steeled my nerves to speak. I felt Nico shift beside me, his legs dropping to the ground as he twisted his torso around, knee bumping mine. His eyes prickled my skin as he stared, willing me to talk. Clearing my throat, I closed the book in my hands, stroking the worn surface as I tried to organise my words.

"The other day... or night I guess...," I said, pinching a splitting corner of the book, my nail slipping beneath the soft paper. "Did we... you know..."

"Fuck?" Nico said, eyes still closed though he smirked a little. "Yeah, pretty sure we did."

"Oh," I said, the small speck of hope that we hadn't actually done anything and that the pain in my backside was just because I fell in my drunken stupor blown to bits with his simple response.

"Relax," Nico said, "It didn't mean anything. I was curious, and drunk. And you were... well... *more* drunk. Just forget about it. And don't go telling people about it either, alright? I'm not usually into people like you."

"Oh, ok, *thank god.* I'm not into people like you either," I said, rubbing my face with my hands, fatigued. Turning to Nico with a relieved smile on my face, I was met with his blank stare, eyes wide open as he looked at me with an odd expression on his features. Tilting my head to the side, confused, Nico just shook his head softly, eyes closing again. Taking that as a cue that this conversation was over, I opened my book again, only getting through a paragraph before the bell rang. Already in my classroom for the next period, I pulled out my biology folder and pulled out the notes for this class, arranging my highlighters and pens neatly in front of me. It wasn't until the door opened, other students coming in that I realised Nico hadn't moved from the seat next to me.

"Nico?" a high-pitched voice called, acting overly surprised as she - Alyssa, I believed - pranced over, her short dress revealing more than I cared to see. Her perfume was sickly sweet as she stepped behind Nico, wrapping her arms around his back, her breasts pressed against the back of his head. "What are you doing here?" Annoyance flickered on Nico's face, though it quickly disappeared as he opened his eyes, gripping the girl's ponytail to pull her down for a quick kiss. I gagged a little as I heard a slick pop as their lips disconnected, Nico's mouth glossy as the girl panted, breathless.

"I'm in this class," Nico said, letting go of the girl, who giggled with excitement.

"Really? Awesome, come to the back and sit with us," Alyssa said, grasping Nico's bicep in her painted hands, her long nails making shadowed indentations on his tattoos. Glancing backwards, I noticed a small group of girls watching and whispering on at their friend, some of their giggles covered by their hands, others just smiling and filming her shamelessly on their phones. "Come on, it'll be way more fun back there."

I ignored the way Nico's eyes flickered over to me for a brief second, my own focusing on my books in front of me as I fiddled with the clasp of my binder. Then, Nico's body was rising from his chair, the girl shrieking with excitement as she pressed her body against his own, tugging him towards her friends, who also squealed and nearly wet themselves in the process. The class was still in a cacophony of shrill teenage voices as the teacher walked in, an uptight women with slicked back hair and round glasses which only made her shorter, stout frame all the more round. Her lips were painted a deep burgundy, hard set in a scowl as she looked at the students in front of her. Ms Levenson was one of my school's more esteemed teachers, her students always achieving grades well beyond the rest. Unfortunately, to get there you had to suffer through a year with her strict teaching methods, but her temperament wasn't an issue unless you were on her radar, which I definitely was not.

Nico, however, most definitely was.

"Mr Beckett, finally decided to join us, I see," Ms Levenson said, voice icy as she pushed up her glasses with her chubby fingers, peering at the back through her dark, beady eyes. The thick mole above her upper lip wiggled as she spoke, her arms crossing in front of her body as she strode about the front of the classroom. Nico didn't reply to her, simply giving her a bored glance, before turning his head out the window again. The vein in Ms Levenson's head throbbed, but she quashed the feeling as she opened her teaching notes, harsh voice beginning to talk about the topics that we would cover this week.

"...And for the group experiment, we'll be drawing partners out of a hat," Ms Levenson said, her frown turning into a gleeful smile as her students all simultaneously groaned, casting each other looks as the mouthed names that they didn't want to be paired with. I was sure that some of those mouths said my name, but shrugged off the feeling as Ms Levenson hovered in front of me, her hand resting on the edge of my desk.

"Hopefully you'll get someone who won't make you do all the work, Wesley," Ms Levenson said, her voice uncharacteristically soft as she shook the box, before walking to the back for them to pick their partners. I watched as the first girl reached in, opened the parcel and immediately

looked like she wanted to slam her head into a wall. Standing up, she strode over to the front of the room, tapping a skinny boy on the shoulder, disgust dripping from her face. A few other people picked their partners, slowly moving across the room to find their classmates. Alyssa reached into the box, her lips moving in a chant as she glanced sideways at Nico, who looked unamused at the whole situation. Alyssa's face darkened as she opened up the wad of paper, scrunching it up and throwing it onto the table in front of her. Her eyes met mine, and I swore under my breath.

Alyssa Stiles . Dumb as shit, and would definitely make me pull the weight.

"Yay me," I groaned sarcastically, looking over my shoulder at the girl who had cast away my name and resumed her activities of hanging off Nico's shoulders like he was a swing, twirling a curl of her hair in her fingers as she grinned at him. Even though her glossy lips were moving rapidly as she spoke, Nico's eyes started to drift shut, on the verge of falling asleep again. The sight of him dozing off made me smile a little, until Ms Levenson gestured for me to go over to Alyssa to prepare for the project having peeked at my name on the paper. Giving my teacher a pathetically pleading look, the woman chuckling slightly as she dangled the box in front of another victim, making me frown as I gathered up my books and slowly walked to the back of the classroom.

Stopping in front of Alyssa's seat, books heavy in my arms, I cleared my throat. Her friends all looked up at me, eyes raking up and down my figure, before scoffing and giving each other glances. Alyssa didn't look away from Nico, whose eyes were now closed shut completely. Ignoring them, I coughed again, Alyssa finally tilting her head up towards me. She raised a carefully painted brow upwards, clicking her tongue in annoyance.

"What do *you* want?" she asked, and I pointed to the crinkled piece paper with my name on it. Grimacing she opened her mouth to retort, until her friend slapped her on the arm.

"Hey, you're lucky - he gets the best grades in this class. Just make him do everything and you'll boost your score," the girl said in a hushed tone, Alyssa's eyes brightening before looking back up at me, a deceivingly warm smile on her face.

"Oh, so you're my partner, um... Wil..."

"Wesley," I said, Alyssa laughing dryly as she nodded, leaning back in her chair.

"Yeah, I knew that! So we're doing the experiment together, right?"

"We are," I said, narrowing my eyes as Alyssa's phone beeped in front of her, making her immediately look downwards as I tried to maintain her attention. "So, when are you free so we can do this experiment?"

"Huh? One second," Alyssa said, fingers clacking on her phone as her friend peered over her shoulder.

"Oh, yeah, no problem," I said, words drawn out sarcastically as I hefted my books onto my other arm, already tired. "It's not like I have anywhere to be."

"I'm free this weekend," Nico's husky voice suddenly spoke, Alyssa's head snapping up from her phone, fingers poised mid-emoji as she blinked.

" *What* ?" both Alyssa and I said in unison, Nico just looking up at me, a hidden smile on his lips.

Picking up the useless piece of paper from the table and unfurling it, Nico waved it in front of my face.

"We're swapping partners," Nico said coolly, not even looking at Alyssa as he got up from his chair, hands in his pockets. As he walked past me, his shoulder bumped with mine, his head tilting downwards to look at me. "Let's go."

I felt my cheeks flush as Alyssa and her posse all looked at me with jealousy in their eyes, making me grit my teeth as I spun on my heels, stepping in line behind Nico. Pulling back the chair he had sat in beside me less than an hour before, he kicked my own chair back to let me get in. Sinking into the seat, confused as to why Nico was doing this, Ms Levenson came up to me, face slightly amused.

"Good luck, Wesley," my teacher said, before giving Nico a once over, face stony as she noticed that he was falling asleep again, her hand slamming against the desk. Nico's left eye opened sleepily at the nose, before closing again. Ms Levenson almost growled at his disrespect, but turned on her heel to go and pester another student who would react to her provocations.

"This weekend then?" I asked quietly, Nico humming in response. "Where..."

"My place," Nico said, blue eyes revealing themselves as he smirked. "You know where it is."

FIVE

Nico was already out of the classroom before the lunch bell even rang, leaving me with the plans for our experiment sprawled out on the table. Sighing, I pulled all of the loose sheets together and stuffed them into my folder. Most of the scribble on them was in my own fluid handwriting, but on a few Nico's heavy-handed text was scratched onto the pages. His handwriting was coarse and sharp, the pen digging into the paper roughly as his hand moved. I had done most of the thinking, but when Nico chimed in with a few short ideas, I took them in, grateful that he was least making an effort to *look* like he was trying. I was sure that Alyssa would have been on her phone the whole time, not even bothering to pretend she was working.

As long as I get the grades I wanted, I was fine.

Thanking Ms Levenson as I exited the room, the woman not looking up from her notes as she waved her hand, I quickly made my way to my locker, Benny already there and waiting for me impatiently.

"Taking your sweet time," Benny complained, punching me on the arm as I unlocked my locker, his knuckles making me wince a little as I shoved my books into my locker. Pulling out my bag, Benny almost made me stumble as he rushed me to the canteen, which was already packed with people trying to buy something to eat before the daily stocks ran out. "It's because you took so long that there's probably nothing left!"

"Shut up, Benny," I said, though I frowned as I tried to push through the crowd which had somehow grown thicker than how it was when Benny and I had entered the fray. Slipping into momentary breaches in the mass of people, I somehow managed to get to the counter, the lunch ladies giving me tired looks under their hair nets.

"What do you want?" one of them asked, yawning slightly as I pointed to a box of rice and curry, shoving the money into her hand before slinking out of the crowd. Retreating along the edges of the canteen, I tried to peer

above the heads of the remaining crowd for Benny, his mop of hair still struggling to get to the counter. Even as a taller boy, Benny was struggling to slip through the crowd like I had, his height advantage only getting him so far as there was barely any room to strong arm his way through.

"Hey, Wesley!" a voice cut through the crowd, making me glance around, confused as to where the voice came from. A laugh erupted from behind me, followed by a tap on the shoulder. Turning, my confused face turned brighter as I saw Sofia beaming up at me. She had changed her hairstyle from this morning, her braid now a bun at the base of her skull, the white ribbon still wrapped around it tightly. She held held a brown paper bag in her hands and had a water bottle tucked under her arm as she looked past me and into the crowd. She raised a brow as she saw Benny cry out triumphantly as he raised his box of pasta above his head like it was his newborn child.

"I didn't know our school was doing a live action production of the Lion King," Sofia said as I laughed, shrugging.

"I don't know that guy, if you're wondering," I said, Sofia snorting, her nose crinkling adorably as she laughed. Feeling Benny's weight resting on my shoulders as he loosely hung around my shoulders, I sighed.

"Yep, you *definitely* don't know him," Sofia said, Benny giving me a look before turning to Sofia, a warm smile on his face.

"Thank you for talking to Wes, I was starting to think that he batted for the other team since he never talks to girls. Ever," Benny said, letting out a fake sob as Sofia snickered elegantly behind her hand as I froze, the images of Nico's tattooed arm around me springing to mind without missing a beat. Shaking my head, I stepped out from under Benny's arm, jabbing him in the side before turning to Sofia.

"Ignore him," I said, Sofia saluting as Benny whined. Giving me a gentle smile, Sofia nudged her head behind her to a group of people sitting around one of the undercover tables in the courtyard.

"My friends and I are having lunch here. Want to join us?" Sofia asked, eyes hopeful as she tenderly tugged on my sleeve.

"I don't have to give you my maths notes in return, right?" I asked, pressing a hand over my heart as I pretended to be hurt as Sofia winked, doubling over as I faux-groaned. "That's cold, Sofia."

"I've got bandaids over there, big boy," Sofia said, making me laugh as she pulled me outside towards her friend's table. They all looked up curiously as Sofia approached them, hand still wrapped around my forearm. Letting go to gesture at my and Benny's faces, Sofia introduced us. The rest of the group at the table were all in her year level; Rachel, a bookish-looking girl who had shortly cropped auburn hair that was pinned back from her eyes with a bright pink clasp, sat on the edge of the table and smiled shyly at us after swallowing daintily. Leonard (Leo, for short), rose from his seat to shake our hands, his teeth impossibly white against his darker skin, which was glossy with exertion after his physical education class just before. And then there was Parker, who waved at us as Sofia introduced him, smiling mid-chew.

"Maths guy, right?" Parker said, curly hair flopping over as Sofia pinched him, giving me an apologetic look. "What? It's true, though."

"Well I'm Wesley, the *maths* guy, apparently," I said, an amused smile on my face as Sofia pushed Parker further down the bench so I could sit beside her, Benny sitting on the opposite side next to Leonard.

"Also the biology guy, from what I've been hearing," Rachel said, leaning over the table. "And chemistry." Leonard whistled, making me rub the back of my neck awkwardly, Sofia laughing.

"Okay, guys, I didn't invite them over here to try and get them to tutor us, unless they want to..." Sofia said, wiggling her brow suggestively as Parker snorted, swallowing his food loudly. "I'm kidding. Kind of. I just want to be friends." Leonard whistled again, though its tone was different from before, making Sofia kick him under the table. I chuckled as Sofia's cheeks flushed a little bit, playing a little into Leonard's teasing as I let out an exaggerated gasp, clasping my fingers over my open mouth.

" *Sofia* ! But we hardly know each other! This is just so sudden and so forward," I let out, making my eyes open as widely as possible, Sofia hitting me on the shoulder as Leonard howled, Rachel choking on her water a little as Parker nudged Sofia in the ribs. As the laughter quietened down, Sofia grumbling under her breath as she chewed on her sandwich, I reached into my bag and pulled out a thin notebook, handing it to the girl beside me. Sofia gave me a questioning look as she opened it, my handwriting lining the pages in bright blue pen.

"Notes?" Sofia asked, confused. "Your notes?"

"They might help your revision a little. Some bits may be hard to read because of my handwriting, but send me a picture and I can translate for you," I said, laughing a little as I pointed out a few messy areas in my notes, Sofia clutching them to her chest gratefully.

"I can actually smell graduation now," Sofia sniffled, before squeezing my forearm lightly. "Thanks, Wes. This is actually really nice of you."

"No problem," I said, mirroring Sofia's smile before turning to my food, Benny giving me a wolfish grin. Giving him a kick to the shin, I ignored his teasing glances between me and Sofia, who had shuffled a little closer. Her shapely thighs brushed against mine and I bristled at the warmth, remembering how Nico's knee had jostled mine in the classroom just an hour or two before.

Just forget about it. I'm not into people like you.

" *Forget it, Wes,* " I chided myself, bumping my thigh against Sofia's, the girl's lips curling up in my periphery.

Forget it.

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Standing in front of the house of my nightmares made me break out in a cold sweat. Last time I had been here, the front of the house had been a blur on my heels. Now taking in my surroundings properly, Nico's house was
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modest in size, but had an ample garden that was flourishing with flowers of all varieties and colours, a blinding array of blossoms that somehow seemed cohesive in their flashiness. The path leading up to the door was made of neatly paved brick, the front door a colourful array of stained windows and white wood. The outer walls were a fresh white, the whole house light and colourful.

I nervously stood outside the door, hand hovering above the wood as I hesitated to knock. How I ended up in this situation and even associating myself with Nico Beckett threw my head into a tailspin. For someone that I can't even remember interacting with (interacting in a very, very intimate sense), he somehow managed to invade my mind when I least wanted him to. It was driving me insane.

Knocking on the door, it took less than a minute for Nico to open it, looking very much out of place in the bright house. Clad in black jeans, ripped at the knees and a simple black T-shirt, Nico looked like he had just gotten out of bed no sooner than five minutes ago and had thrown on the first thing that he could find. I looked at him bitterly, slightly annoyed at how he still managed to look good with such minimal effort. His eyes were tired, but he still pushed open the door and ushered me inside, closing the door behind me. The inside of the house was as vibrant as the outside, if not even more so. Pictures lined the walls, which were a bright yellow colour that would have looked garish in any other house. Colourful throws were scattered in neat disarray over the couches, and a small, worn upright piano was pressed against the wall, more smaller photographs sitting on top of its structure.

"Nice house," I said softly, Nico chuckling.

"Not the first time you've seen it," Nico reminded me, making me flush.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I replied, looking at the soft carpet under my feet as we walked up the stairs, Nico looking behind his shoulder with an amused grin on his face.

"Sure," Nico said, his voice light as he lead me into the kitchen. The room was small, but homely - pots hung on a rack above the stovetop, and the counter was covered in numerous vases with different clipped flower in

them. Some were a little wilted, but others looked like they had been freshly picked and submerged in water. Two chairs were pulled up to the counter, the upholstery a warm blue shade. I set my bag down after emptying its contents onto the counter, Nico leaning against the table as he watched me unpack, eyes unwavering. After I had finished, Nico jerked his thumb to to the other chair at the counter, a smirk on his mouth.

"You left one of your socks here, by the way. It's over there," Nico said, and I audibly choked as my eyes followed the line directed by Nico's hand. My sock - cloaked in a very distinct dinosaur print - draped over the armrest of the chair. Nearly tumbling out of the chair my ass was planted on, I snatched up the sock and stuffed it deep down into my bag, cursing myself as Nico chuckled, pulling the cursed chair out to sit on it.

"Screw you," I hissed, giving Nico a seething glare as I pressed my hands against my hot cheeks.

"You already did," Nico replied, his smile widening as I groaned, pressing my forehead hard against the table, the cool stone doing little to soothe my embarrassment.

"It was my first time, you know," I mumbled quietly against the stone, Nico letting out a small sound of affirmation. "And I can't even remember it. And it was with *you."*

"You say that like it's a bad thing," Nico said, obviously referring to my abhorrence at the idea of sleeping with him. I scoffed, turning my head so my cheek was against the stone.

"You're a guy," I said simply, Nico shrugging.

"So?"

" *So?* " I echoed, sitting up a little. "I'm *also* a guy."

"I noticed," Nico said, leaning his head on his hand as he rested his elbow on the table. After thinking for a moment, Nico leaned forwards, his face suddenly mere centimetres from mine. I could smell the light cling of

cigarette smoke on his clothes and the heady aftershave he had used in the morning. I gulped, my body arching backwards to move away.

"What the hell are you doing?" I asked, averting my eyes from the man in front of me, who chuckled as he gripped my chin roughly, forcing me to meet his eyes, which were so bright that they fit right into the colourful cascade of the house.

"Satisfying my curiosity," Nico said, his breath warm as he inched forward again, his eyes dropping to my lips.

I was curious, and drunk.

"Are you drunk...?" I asked, Nico pausing in front of me, eyes narrowing for a moment before he let out a loud laugh, pulling back from my face.

"Not this time," Nico said, the curl on his lips making his lip piercing wobble.

I wonder how that piercing felt when we kissed.

"Beans," I blurted out, shocked at my own thoughts. Nico gave me a confused look as I frantically pulled a small packet of mung bean seeds from my pack, dropping them onto the counter. "Experiment. Beans. Start. Now." Nico just gave me an odd look as I opened my books, trying to ignore what just happened, and what had already passed a week ago but was still so fresh in my mind.

I'm not into guys, and definitely not into Nico-fucking-Beckett. No way in hell.

A/N: Thanks so much for reading! :) I've been publishing these chapters every Monday but today's was a little late since I have exams atm and they're slowly killing me T_T The next chapter should be out as per usual though!

SIX

After starting our work, Nico had quickly grown bored, and had left moments after to his room to do God knows what up there. By the time he came down again I had already laid out all the plastic petri dishes and made up the glucose solutions in some cups and measuring utensils I had to find for myself in the unfamiliar kitchen. When I asked him to at least help me place the mung beans into the dishes, he had just given me an incredulous look as he spent the time just scrolling on his phone.

Maybe Alyssa would've been better, at least I didn't have any expectations for her whatsoever.

"You're the worst," I grumbled as I neatly packed the prepared petri dishes into a cardboard box, careful not to jostle them. Nico's lips quirked up as he glanced up at me from his phone, my cheeks red as I glared at him.

"Done?" Nico asked, eyes challenging as I let out a frustrated grunt, hands balling into fists.

"You're so..." I started, before forcing out a gush of air from my lungs, dispelling my anger as I closed my eyes, rubbing the bridge of my nose firmly. "Never mind. Do you have a dark cupboard or wardrobe we can store these in while they sprout? They'll only have to be in there for a week."

"You're storing sprouts," Nico started, raising a brow, "in my house?"

Pasting a strained, stiff smile on my face I looked at Nico dead in the eye, knuckles white as I gripped the box in my hands.

"If you had helped me with the project, you would have known that," I said slowly, Nico letting out a deep chuckle as he shrugged, getting off the chair before slipping his phone into his back pocket. I was surprised when he reached over the counter to take the box from my hands, tenderly holding it

in one arm as he gestured up the stairs with the other while we walked out of the kitchen.

"We can use my wardrobe, there should be space there," Nico said, my steps faltering behind him.

"Your wardrobe?" I asked weakly, face paling as we walked up the stairs. "It doesn't have to be *your* wardrobe. Any dark closet would do."

"Mine *is* a dark closet," Nico said, smirking a little at my hesitance at the front of his door. "Nervous?" Nico said, voice amused as he opened the door to his bedroom, stepping inside. Turning around, Nico kicked the door open a little wider, the curl of his lips taunting as he looked me in the eye.

"I'm fine," I replied quickly, hands fisting again as I stepped inside. I bristled as I heard Nico's low chuckle by my ear as I walked past him, the door clicking shut as I moved past.

Glancing around the room, I realised that nothing much had changed since last Saturday. The walls were still green, the fan still turning weakly in a circle through the air. Posters were still peeling from the walls, his desk was still covered in piles of old paper and books. Clothes were still strewn across the room wildly, but thankfully, mine weren't among the wreckage this time.

Looking at his bed, I gulped as I noticed the same pale sheets from that day. The same pillows, the same thin blanket half fallen on the floor as Nico probably kicked it off during the humid summer night. My fingers itched to touch the sheets, wrinkled in the shape of Nico's tall form. I felt my mouth go dry as I tore my eyes away from the bed, only to bump my nose against Nico's chest, which was suddenly so close to me. Smoke and the scent of his sweat engulfed me and I hiccuped, startled as I stumbled backwards. The back of my legs hit the frame of his bed, the edge slamming into the bend of my knee sending my legs folding and body falling. Strong hands tried to grip mine as I fell, but my weight ended up dragging them down with me.

Back hitting the soft mattress, legs dangling off the side, I opened my eyes to find Nico staring down at me with his sparkling blue eyes. His arms trapped my head between them, the dark tattoos on them spiralling up and disappearing under his dark shirt, which hung loosely around his chest, revealing the top of his chest, which rose and fell softly. Dark hair fell down from his face, his legs tangled with mine at the edge of the bed.

The feeling of his body on top of mine made me shiver as my mouth popped open, eyes wide as I realised my body *knew* this feeling. Before I could register it, my hands rose upwards, finger tips brushing over Nico's cheeks. The feeling of his skin beneath them sent a jolt flying through me straight from my core as I remembered.

And I really wish that I hadn't.

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I swayed on my feet as the light blared in my eyes, making me wince as I mumbled to myself. Pushing through the crowd, which moved in reckless waves around me, I stumbled to the far side away from the main hall to a secluded hallway where there were far less people, and much less noise. I let out a relieved sigh as the flashing stopped assaulting my eyes, my hands waving in front of my face as a drooping smile sat on my lips.

The drink in my hand sloshed down my arm, but the coolness was refreshing after wading through the sweaty throng of people gyrating downstairs. I snorted as my feet snagged on the edge of the carpet, my body flying to the side as my hands wildly flung outwards, hitting the wall as I dangerously steadied myself. Still upright, I slid forwards against the wall, my legs wobbly as I took slow, lagging steps forward.

My fingers soon hit a ledge in the wall, fingers fumbling onto a doorknob. Twisting it, I stepped and flung forwards as my foot slipped, sending my flying face first onto the floor. My pained grunt was silenced by a surprised, feminine gasp sounding from in front of me. Blinking up through bleary eyes, struggling in the darkness, I saw two figures sitting on an armchair in front of me. The tall boy was lounging back in the chair, shirt discarded, as the girl straddled his muscled thighs with nothing but her undergarments on,
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her bra unclasped but still dangling on her shoulders. I narrowed my eyes as their hazy figures focused, noticing that the boy's hands were resting on the girl's rounded hips, fingers slipping slightly under the waistband of her lacy panties.

"What the fuck?" the girl almost yelled, hand flying to her bra which was about to fall off, though she didn't make a move to find any more of her modesty that had been strewn across the room. The guy just looked at me with only the hint of interest, blue eyes peering at me from over the girl's shoulder as she hissed something with her bright, apple red lips. The boy blinked slowly, like he couldn't see much at all – or like he couldn't see through the fog of vodka clouding his head. The boy had red, sticky marks in the same shade scattered on his chest that almost looked like brands on his smooth skin. Seeing the marks on his otherwise blemish-less chest made me frown, the thought that he would look much better without them.

Loose-lipped because of the drink, my mouth opened and said just that. The girl looked taken aback as her mouth popped open, the tackiness of her lipstick making them smack audibly. The boy's mouth curled upwards, his hand covering it soon after as his shoulders shook, revealing the black marks of his tattoos that creeped up from his arm to the back of his hand.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" the girl snapped, glaring at me as I struggled to pull myself back to my feet, managing to do so only by grabbing the legs of the bed to my left as leverage. "Get the hell out of here, creep!"

" *Creep* ," I snorted, my hand waving away her words as I wobbled. "That's funny. *Creep. Cur-eep* . It's a funny word. Funny. Ha."

The boy's shoulders shook again, and he let out a quiet snorting noise, which made me crinkle my nose.

"I said get out of he- oomph," the girl said, her sharp words interrupted by her surprised grunt as the boy gripped her by her thighs, only to lift her up enough so he could get up from the seat himself. The movement was hasty, and I was sure the boy almost dropped the girl as he swayed on his feet. After he was free, he all but dropped her onto the chair, her almost bare ass

bouncing on the plush upholstery. Pulling on his shirt without a word – backwards at first, but then he noticed the tag tickling the front of his neck – the boy rubbing off the lipstick on his chest with the back of his hand as the girl rose to her knees, hand pressing against Nico's turned back. "Nico? Where are you going?" The boy staggered slightly on his feet as the girl grabbed his hips. Her voice, low as she tried to lull him back into her arms, was ignored as I giggled.

"Nico," I echoed, grinning a little at the two syllables rolling off my lips, so easy under the smoothness of the alcohol. " *Nico.* That's another funny word. *Niiiiiico.* " Laughing as I took a step forward, my brain not quite catching up to my body's movements, I started to tip towards the ground again. Before I could face plant for a second time, my face was smothered into a soft shirt which barely cushioned a hard, flat chest. Heavy arms gripped onto my torso, hands snaking around my hips as the body swayed with my force, knees jostling. The boy let out a grunt as my weight pushed him back into some furniture, which helped keep us upright.

"Oops," I said, voice muffled by the boy's chest. Turning my head up, a watery grin on my face, I tapped my open palm against the boy's pecs in an apologetic pat. "I fell. Again. That's funny."

"It is. Funny. Very funny," the boy said, mouth curled upwards as he slung my arm over his shoulder, pulling me with him as the forgotten girl screamed at our backs. I nuzzled my nose into his chest, inhaling deeply and quickly loosed a sound between an amused snort and grunt of disgust. He smelled like vodka or tequila or a dangerous mix of everything.

"Where are we going?" I asked, leaning against the boy's side, grateful that I had a wall to lean on, even if he did seem to sway side to side a little. Mm. Swaying is nice.

"Home," the boy replied, like it was obvious.

"My home?" I asked again, brow crinkling. "My home is far. *Reaaaaally far."*

"Mine's not. I don't think," the boy replied, voice rough and crisp but curled with a light slur.

"Oh, that's nice," I said, humming as the boy altered his grip on my hip as he fished a set of car keys out from his pocket after pulling me across the front lawn, leaving the other partygoers inside the house. When he pressed the lock on the door, the lights blinking twice in time to the perky beeps, I laughed.

"Beep beep," I mimicked, hand tapping on the door, the boy letting out a short laugh under his breath as he opened the door after fumbling for a moment. Without being asked, I untangled my arm from the boy's trunk and climbed messily inside, sitting in the passenger's seat. The car smelled like smoke, and I let out a disgusted noise, pinching my nose as I looked at the boy, who had slid into the driver's seat beside me.

"It stinks," I whined, waving my hand in front of my nose. "Driving is bad. You smell bad. Like the bitter drink Benny gave me. You smell like that. It's unsafe to drive when you smell like that."

"It is," the boy replied as I shook my head, gripping his forearm tightly as he started the engine, pulling forward slightly.

" *No*, it's *reaaally* bad. You can die. I can die. I'm too young to die. Driving is bad! Taxi! We need a taxi! Oh... but I... I don't have enough money for... for a taxi. Taxis rip you off..." I said, eyes wide as the boy laughed loudly, slamming down on the brakes and turning off the engine. The boy's hand was covering his mouth again like he was struggling to breathe with how much he was laughing. "Oh no. You stopped... Are we dead?"

"We're not," the boy replied, eyes dropping down to where my hands were clasped around his arm. Following his gaze, I hummed as I gave his arm a gentle squeeze. The muscle felt nice under my fingers, and I giggled as he flexed his arm slightly as he tugged on his door, sadly disengaging his solid arm from my grip. It was only a second or two until Nico pulled open my door, those arms of his tugging me out of his car with less coordination than expected, my body tumbling into his again as we fell and wriggled on the

grass. The grass was soft, Nico wasn't, but he was warm and laughing and I was too.

"Uber," Nico said, voice rumbling under the palms of my hands as he pointed to the curb, where a small silver hatchback was sidling up to the grass.

"Oh! That's nice! Now... now I won't die. I'm too young to die. Did I tell you that I'm too young to die?" I asked, shaking Nico's shoulders, which made him drop his head to my shoulder, laughter muffled against my shirt. He was laughing a lot. He never seemed like the type of person to laugh a lot, but this... this wasn't bad.

Nico and I climbed (struggled) into the back seat of the Uber, the driver giving us raised brows but otherwise not asking many questions. It didn't take long at all for us to pull up to a colourful house surrounded by flowers.

I jumped as the door beside me opened, and I glared up at the boy, who supported his weight on the open door and smiled down at me. His teeth were bright in the night, and perfectly straight. I gulped as I saw his lip ring disappear beneath his tongue as he licked his lips, offering me a hand out of the car. Looking at his hand which was wavering a little, my head tilted, I hesitated before taking it. Looking up into the boy's eyes again, I let out a calm breath.

"Your eyes are pretty," I said, the boy chuckling again, taking my hand in his as he pulled me out of the car, my feet hitting the pavement before I collided with his chest again. It felt nice pressed around his taut body, and I found myself leaning into his touch, my hands wrapping around his waist as I buried my head into his neck. The two of us swayed, and it was almost like we were dancing. "And you're warm. I like warm."

"Do you?" the boy asked, his voice vibrating through me as he held his lips close to my ear. I shivered with the noise, nodding my head. The boy's chuckle made us wobble again as he pulled his head back to look at my face, his fingers tugging and pinching at my cheeks, another laugh erupting from his mouth. I pouted, swatting at his hands, and his eyes dropped to my

lips. Under his gaze, my tongue flickered against the buds to wet them, expectant.

I wonder what that lip ring would feel like.

Rising onto my toes slightly, rocking in Nico's tight embrace, I closed my eyes. I tensed a little as I felt fingers pull my glasses from my face, some loose strands of hair fluttering against my eyelids. No time had passed at all before I felt soft lips that tasted bitter and laced with nicotine and drink press against my own, the slight coolness of metal making me flush.

"Feels nice," I murmured against the boy's lips, feeling them curl with the words.

"I can make you feel even nicer, if you want me to," the boy said as he pulled back by a hair, his lip ring still brushing against my lower lip. Grinning slightly, I pushed my mouth against his again, humming, suddenly not minding the way he tasted like bitter alcohol.

"I want you to."

A/N: Please don't drink and drive folks. Seriously. Drive safe! Also, this chapter has been edited from its original version - I had originally intended for both of my boys to be quite inebriated, but it didn't come across that way at first (I admit my fault here)! Here, they are both very drunk, but I don't believe that consent when under the influence of drugs or alcohol is truly consent, and here it goes both ways. Moral of the chapter - please drink responsibly everyone!

SEVEN

A/N: Sex ahead - proceed with caution ;)

I laughed as Nico fumbled with the front door, my back pressed against the wood as his body pushed against it. Kissing me roughly, I gasped as the door behind me gave way, my legs stumbling backwards. Nico let out an amused noise as his hand that was already tight around my waist pulled in stronger, lifting me off the ground slightly. My toes brushed the wooden floor of his house, arms hanging off his neck as our chests bumped with every laboured breath. Pulling back, lips popping, Nico smirked down at me with his bright eyes.

"You okay?" he asked, and I nodded, his grip loosening. My feet found the ground again, but my arms didn't leave his neck, Nico smiling a little. Leaning down again, he pressed another kiss to my lips and I sighed, melting into the warmth.

"Parents?" I whispered breathlessly, Nico just letting out a throaty 'no' in response and he lead me upstairs, deciding to pick me up again so we didn't have to part and me walking backwards up a flight of stairs was likely not going to end well. Wrapping my legs around Nico's waist, fingers tangled in his hair, Nico tugged on my shirt as we walked into the threshold of his bedroom. Dropping me onto my feet, I raised my arms as Nico pulled my shirt off, his eyes roaming the expanse of my newly exposed skin. I felt a little uncomfortable under his heated gaze, arms wrapping around my stomach slightly, head dropping. Nico chuckled a little, making me look up to see him pulling his own shirt over his head. My mouth grew wet as I took in his muscled torso and the smooth dips of his abs, which cast shadows on his skin. A few more tattoos were revealed from under the discarded fabric, one on his left pec and the other low on his hip, almost disappearing beneath the waistband of his jeans.

I watched in awe, as Nico kicked off his shoes, my feet somehow following along with his slow, tantalising actions. I jumped as Nico threw one of his

shoes in my direction, the boot thudding just next to me. Giving him a raised brow, I threw one of my own shoes towards him, Nico sidestepping out of the way. The laces on the shoe snagged on the door handle, swaying from side to side as Nico grinned, stepping towards me again to capture my face in his hands, kissing me hungrily.

As I sighed, his tongue found the opportunity to slip between my parted lips, stroking the dorsum of my own. I moaned as our tongues pushed and pulled, my teeth often tugging on his lip ring, making him groan into my mouth.

This was what a kiss was supposed to feel like. It didn't feel like this when I had kissed girls (or, a single girl, if we wanted to be technical) before. Maybe it was just experience, I mean, we were young back then. Or maybe it was because they were girls? In the haze of my alcohol-riddled mine, the thought didn't scare me as much as it would if I were sober. It was just sitting there, a fact as clear as Nico's eyes. When I felt Nico's hard body pressed against mine, his feverish lips claiming my own, it felt... exciting. Liberating. Dangerous.

Right.

I soon found myself lying back on the bed, Nico climbing on top of me. Two arms imprisoning my head, his thighs capturing my legs, I blinked up at him as he looked down at me, eyes filled with something that I couldn't put my finger on. The look was gone in a moment, or maybe I just ignored it, as Nico's rough fingers pushed my messy hair from my face, his fingers making my electrified skin tingle. His hand moved down to cup my cheek, and I turned my head to press a sloppy kiss to his palm, tongue flicking out slightly as Nico growled.

Nico then raised himself from his hunched position, hands tugging at his belt, button popping open and zip sliding down. I swallowed thickly as he pulled his jeans off, leaving him only in his underwear, which did little to hide what was encased in the soft cotton. His evident bulge made me all too painfully aware of my own, which was straining against my pants. Nico glanced down at my crotch, making me blush as I too started to undo my pants. My fingers, imprecise and struggling, made Nico pull my hands

away from the straining cloth, his own fingers quickly working to release me. I relaxed against the bed, head back as Nico ordered me to lift my hips up, sliding my pants around the curve of my ass.

I heard the rustle of pants being discarded to the side, Nico's body soon laying atop mine, chests flush against each other. He was heavy, and hot, and very, very hard. I let out a surprised gasp as his hips moved, his erection brushing against mine, the fabric between us rubbing. Nico grinned at the noise I released, resting on his elbows to kiss me, his lips sloppy as they started to move down my chin to my neck. I craned my neck to the side, one hand gripping the sheets as the other gently pulled at his hair, Nico's lips nibbling and sucking the curve of my shoulder.

"Your skin is salty," Nico murmured against my skin, breath hot as I shivered, embarrassed. "It's not bad."

"Shut up," I weakly replied, Nico chuckling as his lips moved down to my chest, teeth, lips and tongue leaving heavy red welts there. I trembled with anticipation as he moved lower and lower, until his teeth picked at the elasticated waistband of my underwear. Looking up at me through dark lashes, eyes starving, I found myself nodding and hips rising. Like before, the fabric slid off my body easily, Nico throwing them onto the ground. I barely had time to register that I was now completely naked in front of him as his mouth enclosed around my already hard member, slick and warm.

" *Fuck,* " I moaned, head flying back as Nico let out a rumbling hum, the vibration making me gasp. Hand flying down to caress the back of his head, I bit my lip to suppress another groan as his cheeks hollowed and tongue pulled. It felt messy, Nico's tongue going everywhere and anywhere as his lip ring bumped coolly against my throbbing skin.

"Nico, I'm - *shiiit* !" I started, words failing me as I felt pressure build up in my abdomen, my eyes closing as I shook, Nico releasing me from his mouth with an obscene pop just before I released. Hot seed sprayed from my cock, hitting Nico's stomach in thick, white streaks. I looked up at Nico, shocked, as he just smirked and wiped some of the cum off his stomach with a finger and stuck it in his mouth. I felt my penis rouse with the sight, its head twitching slightly as Nico pulled his finger out, glistening and wet.

My eyes were heavy lidded as I watched Nico move, hands slowly gripping his underwear to pull it swiftly off his body. I felt my own shiver as his erection burst free, bumping against his lower abdomen as it strained with arousal.

"This is my first time with a guy," Nico said, voice rough and low as he looked at me, blue eyes darkening. I gulped as he lowered himself down to reach for a bottle on his bedside table, popping open the cap with his teeth. Smearing the clear liquid over his fingers, my hands fisted in the sheets as they brushed over the curve of my ass, slowly moving further inwards. I bristled as his finger brushed my asshole, my hips raising reflexively. Gazing at me, questioning, Nico's fingers paused at my entrance, which puckered with anticipation.

"It's fine," I said, raising my hips as I spoke, eyes locked with Nico's. "I'm fine." With that, Nico gently pushed a finger into me, making me suck in a tight breath, wincing. Pausing again, Nico looked at me, his other hand raising to my face to brush against my cheek, thumb resting against my lips which were pressed tightly together. His touch made me relax slightly, lips parting slightly as I slowly grew used to the sensation in my ass. Nico's thumb brushed over my lips as I nodded, his finger moving inside me. I gasped as an unfamiliar feeling shot through me, my eyes closing and my toes curled.

Slowly, Nico inserted a second finger, the mixture of pain and pleasure overwhelming me as I whimpered against Nico's fingers, which tasted a little bitter. I groaned as his fingers moved in and out of me, stretching and tugging at the skin there. I shook as his fingers curled a little inside of me, brushing against the walls and making me cry out, sheets crinkling in my palms.

"Okay?" Nico whispered, voice husky and thick as he moved his hand away from my face, only to kiss me roughly. I moaned into his mouth, the only answer he needed to hear. "Can I..."

"Yes," I answered desperately, Nico smiling against my lips as he pulled his fingers out of me, the crinkle of a condom wrapper barely heard as the buzzing in my ears heightened. I felt my stomach drop at the sudden

emptiness, but was soon biting my lip as I felt the head of his cock pressing against my entrance. Nico gave me another heated look, one that I returned in full.

Then he pressed in.

"Ow, fuck," I hissed, one hand gripping the bedding beside me, the other flying to Nico's arm, fingers digging into his taut flesh. Nico also winced a little, but didn't push my hand off him as he slowed his movement, waiting for me to relax. My ass burned, but it also itched. Nico's cock, far thicker than his fingers, hadn't reached as far as his digits had and the skin that had been touched before prickled for more. It hurt, but it was a good, aching, hungry pain.

Feeling me relax around him, Nico gently pushed further in, a groan escaping his lips as my tightness clamped around him. I gasped as I felt his full length in me, our hips slapping together.

"Shit, you're so fucking tight, *Wes,* " Nico moaned, the sound of my strained name on his tongue making me forget about the pain and the burning as I groaned, fingers clamouring upwards to pull Nico's face down, kissing him sloppily. His lips moved with mine, both of us feverish with our hunger for each other. "I want to fuck you," Nico groaned into my mouth, making me whimper with need, nodding. Nico growled a little as he pulled his hips back, every bump of his dick rippling inside me as all of my senses were directed downwards, my back arching as he moved.

"Nico!" I cried as his hips bucked, dick thrusting into me, hitting me a little deeper. I felt tears spring to my eyes as he continued to thrust into me, his panting breaths hot in my ear as his torso lay against mine. My hands clawed and gripped at his tensed back, my mouth murmuring words that I couldn't make out as white exploded in my mind as Nico's movements became erratic, his ragged breaths labouring as he grit his teeth beside my ear. When he came inside me, dick trembling, I let out a long, breathy moan, Nico nibbling at my earlobe as he slowly softened inside of me. Nico's body collapsed on mine, larger and heavier, but I didn't try to move him at all. The ends of his dark hair tickled my cheek as he rest his head

down in the crook of my neck, my arms still resting around his back in a tired, spent embrace.

The two of us just lay there for while, the creak of the fan rhythmically beating with our laboured breaths. Soon, my eyes began to grow heavy, barely registering when Nico's body finally lifted from mine.

The last thing I could see before my eyes drifted shut were bright blue eyes and dark tattoos hovering in front of me as strong hands pulled a blanket over my body.

The sheets were warm.

EIGHT

Everything came flooding back to me in one, terrible, painful burst. With Nico hovering above me looking so similar to how he had looked when he had fucked me a week ago, my body reacted before my brain could even register what was going on.

Suddenly, there was a loud smack and a stinging pain in my hand as I punched him, knuckles meeting jaw. Nico's head snapped to the side, his eyes darkening at the sudden contact, his body stumbling back from mine. I bolted up from his bed, eyes wide as my hand trembled, Nico giving me a smouldering look as he glared, lips pulling back in a snarl as he pressed a hand against his now throbbing jaw. From the force I put into it, it would definitely be hurting right now.

"Oh my fucking God," I whispered, taking a tentative step back, hands outstretched. "I am so sorry. I just... I mean... I didn't mean... fuck... *sorry!* " I blabbered, Nico opening his mouth to say something, but his words were lost as I ran out of his room in a flurry, arms flailing as my heart hammered in my chest.

I seemed to be making a habit of running out of Nico Beckett's bedroom in a panic.

Rushing into the kitchen and grabbing my backpack from the floor, I got the hell out of that house, quickly running back home with a speed that would rival any member on the track team. Pulling out my keys quickly, swearing at the red patches on my knuckles, I quickly opened the door and ran through it. My had immediately smacked into something soft which yelped, a hand reaching down to slap me on the head.

"What the hell, Wes!" Jamie grumbled as I stepped backwards, rubbing my nose as Jamie crossed her arms, foot tapping in frustration until she looked at me properly, her stance relaxing as a small smile crossed her face. "You look as flustered as you did last week, where did you go?" Jamie pestered,

her smile widening as my cheeks flushed. I gave her a withering look, which she deflected with the flick of her hand. "Where did you go, Wes? Who did you see? Or more like... who did you *do* ?"

"Fuck off, I was working on a bio project, okay?" I snapped, my sister laughing as she pulled me into a headlock, my body flailing.

"I know, little bro," Jamie snorted, releasing me as she rolled her eyes, though there was still a broad grin on her face. "Just messing with you. Your reactions are too good."

"I hate you," I mumbled, Jamie just ruffling my hair before disappearing into the kitchen as I made my way upstairs. Flopping onto my bed, I rubbed at the red, tender skin at my knuckles. My hand throbbed, and I could only imagine how much Nico's jaw smarted now.

"I am so fucking dead," I said weakly, covering my eyes with my hands, slither of light filtering through the gaps in my fingers.

This is the worst.

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"Wes!"

I glanced around at the voice, heart swelling a little as I saw Sofia waving over at me from a cluster of seats, Rachel and Parker sitting beside her. Parker had one of his feet propped up on a free seat, waving me over as another commuter began to make a beeline towards the seat. Apologising as I pushed past the standing travellers in the aisle, I threw my bag onto the seat as the business woman gave me a withering look, heels clacking on the seat. Meekly, I lowered myself into the seat, Parker laughing at the shame on my face.

Since having lunch with Sofia and her friends last Monday, Benny and I had been hanging around them a lot more, and I had found that everyone except for Leo (who had football training early in the morning) took the same train as me in the morning. It was now unspoken knowledge that we
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would all travel to school together, and I found having someone to sit with in the train was nice, despite Parker's noisiness, which often garnered unwanted attention to our group.

Parker was now chatting about some video game he had bought over the weekend, which was the reason for his dark eye bags and messy hair. Sofia had chastised him for it, giving me an apologetic look as Parker's naturally loud voice continued chatting, the boy energetic despite being so sleep deprived. Rachel sat on the window side, quietly reading over some revision notes for the chemistry quiz she had in the morning, her brow furrowed as she nibbled on the back of her highlighter.

"Get up to anything fun on the weekend, Wes?" Sofia asked, brown eyes soft as she looked at me, ignoring Parker who pouted with the lack of attention. Her question made me immediately think back to Saturday, Nico straddling me, the *other* time he had straddled me, and my bruised knuckles which were turning a little yellow.

"N-No," I stammered, mentally slapping myself as the shaky voice left my mouth. "It was pretty boring. Just studying, really."

Studying. With Nico.

"Ugh, same here," Sofia groaned, leaning heavily in her seat, before brightening. "Oh, but your notes were honestly such a life saver. I got through that whole unit so much faster with your notes. You're my hero." Sofia feigned a swoon as Parker snorted, my cheeks flushing as the boy kicked my leg, wiggling a brow. Sofia grinned, but her cheeks were tinged a light pink as she looked at me coyly, her hands suddenly fiddling with the end of her ponytail.

"It's our stop," I blurted out, already standing up before the train began to stop. I blushed a little harder as Parker just gave me a knowing grin, Sofia standing up quickly as well. Parker just looked at the two of us from his seat, the two of us hastily walking out of the train. Parker and Rachel followed behind us, and Sofia groaned a little as she saw Parker whispering something to Rachel, her eyes immediately flicking towards us.

I swear, there were hearts flying out of her glasses.

"Ignore them," Sofia sighed, giving me a small smile as we walked towards school.

"Kind of hard to when they're staring at my back like this," I said, glancing cautiously behind me to see Parker wiggling his brows and Rachel with a wide, beaming smile on her face.

"They're always like this," Sofia said, rolling her eyes. "Well, only Parker really, but Rachel always goes along with whatever he's doing."

"They're like this a lot?" I asked, Sofia nodding. "So you have lots of ' *heroes* ', then?" I chuckled a little as Sofia grew red, hitting my arm roughly in embarrassment. I just laughed as I rubbed the spot she hit, her arms still gentle despite trying to put some force into it. Sofia just gave me a look, letting out a breath which made the loose strands of hair in front of her face fly upwards. She was quiet for a moment, before softly speaking.

"You're the only one," Sofia whispered, the words almost too soft for me to comprehend. There was a little falter in my step, my head snapping down towards her, only to see the side of her face hidden by her hair. Though her face was obscured, the tips of her ears that peeked out from behind her hair were pink, and I smiled a little.

She's adorable, unlike that bloody tattooed bastard.

Sofia and I were quiet as we walked into the school, Sofia soon stopping as we were about to walk down separate hallways to our lockers. The girl shifted nervously on her feet for a moment, looking up at me shyly.

"Um, well, have fun at class," she said, her voice a little stiff, and I nodded, lips curling.

"Yeah, see you at lunch," I said, Sofia's face immediately brightening with my words, relieved.

"O-Okay! See you then, Wes," she said, eyes crinkling as she smiled, before linking her arms with Rachel, step perky. Parker just let out a low whistle as he walked past me, making me glower at his back.

Now alone, I slowly turned to go to my locker. Without Sofia and the others around me, fear started to lap at my feet again, my sore hand suddenly throbbing a little louder. I had laid awake in bed all night dreading coming to school, because Nico was definitely going to kill me and bury my body in the bushes somewhere. Definitely.

I warily glanced around the halls, scanning for Nico's mop of black hair and tattoos, but he wasn't to be seen anywhere in the hallway. Letting out a tight breath, some of the tension leaving my shoulders, I neared my locker and spun my code into its lock. I jumped and audibly cursed as I felt hands land onto my shoulders, whirling around with my hands up.

"Woah, Wes! Calm down," Benny cackled, amused. "Jesus, why so jumpy today?"

"Someone sneaking up to you will do that, you know," I said dryly, Benny shrugging as he opened his own locked beside me.

"I saw you walking in with Sofia," Benny said suddenly, peering from behind his open locker door. I choked on my own spit as he snickered. "Ohhh yeah. I saw *everything* . The girl was basically a puddle on the floor and you-" Benny couldn't contain his laughter anymore as he doubled over, tearing up. I hissed at him to stop, pinching the back of his neck as he hiccuped. "F-Fine, Wes. It's just... so funny... I can't handle it." Benny wheezed as he clapped his hand on my shoulder again, giving me a dead serious look that was only disrupted by his shaking lips, which were trying not to smile. "Just... remember to use protection, alright?"

"Screw you, Ben," I groaned, shaking my head as Benny beamed in glee at my discomfort. Benny opened his mouth to say something, but his eyes moved behind my back, whistling a little.

"Damn, that looks like it hurts," Benny said, rubbing his chin. I heard hushed whispers build up in a crescendo behind me as I turned, feeling sick

as I saw Nico walking down the hallway. His hair was messily pulled back from his forehead, his dark brows creased as he looked through the crowd. There was a dark, purplish bruise that spanned the length of the left side of his chiseled jaw, and there was a cut on his lip that had scabbed over. His mouth was set in a frown, though it didn't deter a few girls from walking up to him with their chests pushed out and the hips cocked to the side. Nico just glanced down at them with disinterest, ignoring them as he brushed past, eyes returning to his surroundings as he looked for someone.

Don't be me, don't be me, don't be me, I chanted, clutching the books in my hands tightly, knuckles on one hand white, the other red.

Nico's eyes moved across the hallway, stopping once they found me. His steps quickened as his eyes focused, his body turning towards me. The throng of students that were in the hallway parted like the Red Sea, eyes curious.

"He totally got into another fight, look at his face!" a voice whispered from behind me, followed by a few giggles. "He's still hot though."

"I wonder who he beat up this time," a male voice laughed, and I paled. "They must be looking way worse than he is."

Well, my ass is, at least.

"He looks *pissed* ," Benny said, laughing. "Whoever he's pissed at is so fucked."

If I wasn't in my spot, stricken with dread, I would have clocked Benny on the head. As Nico grew closer, Benny started to become a little more tense behind me, his eyes glancing around. There was no one else around us, most people moving out of Nico's path, which was a beeline towards the two of us.

"What the fuck? Is he walking over here?" Benny whispered, Nico taking two long strides to step in front of me, eyes peering down at me, flashing as he scowled. His jaw was locked tight, straining against the bruise. Nico's face looked like he wanted to say something as he stared at me, the hairs on

the back of my neck standing erect. Blue eyes left mine for a brief moment, giving Benny a cold look before turning back to me. I felt Benny shake a little behind me.

"You..." Nico started, his voice low. Looking around the room and all the eyes on us, Nico clicked his tongue in annoyance, before sighing. "I'll see you in bio."

"Y-Yeah, see you," I stammered, Nico turning on his heels and walking back the way he came and out of the school, lighter and cigarette in hand. A chill washed over me as people cast me curious looks, swallowing as I slammed my locker shut, the loud noise making everyone turn away.

"What the hell was that?" Benny demanded, looking shellshocked. "Why is he talking to you? Why did he look so pissed? When the hell did you even start talking to Nico Beckett? What. The. Fuck?"

He's talking to me because we fucked. He's pissed because I punched him. We started talking when I got wasted at that party you forced me to go to.

"We're biology partners," I said, the cloudy truth easier to say than the clearer truth.

"Still doesn't tell me why *Nico Beckett* is talking to you! Even if you're lab partners, he doesn't just go up and talk to anyone. *Ever.* He doesn't even have any friends at school after all of his graduated last year, and he sure as hell hasn't made an effort to make any, but now he's talking to *you?* " Benny said, eyes somehow widening even further.

"I guess I'm just a really good bio partner?" I said, laughing pathetically as Benny gave me a short look.

"Okay, I still call bullshit, but I'm freaking the hell out so I'll drop it for now," Benny said, and I gave him a grateful look. "But seriously, if Nico Beckett wants to kill you, please don't drag me into it." Benny gave me a pleading look just as the bell rang.

"Wow, you're such a great friend," I said wryly, but managed to smile a little as Benny gave me a salute, before ducking away to his class.

I sighed as there were a few stragglers still casting me curious glances as I made my way to class, head down.

This was going to be a long day.

NINE

I usually came to class early, but this time, I made it through the doors of the biology lab at the last second, just before the clock ticked over the hour. Ms. Levenson looked at me, surprised at my almost-tardiness, but didn't say anything as I looked at the room, Nico not there. Sitting at an my usual seat at the front, Ms. Levenson cleared her throat as she walked over to the whiteboard, pen squeaking.

"Today we'll be learning about plant reproduction," Ms. Levenson said, rolling her eyes as there were a few snickers from the back of the classroom. "Yes, yes, *reproduction* . Get all of your immature laughter out now." Ms. Levenson sighed as giggles ensued. Then, the classroom door opened with a loud bang as the hinges swung wildly, everyone going quiet. I didn't have to look up to see who was standing there, my body tensing immediately.

"Late again, Mr. Beckett," Ms. Levenson said coldly.

Shit.

I didn't look up from my books as I heard Nico's shoes slap against the ground, cursing silently as the chair beside me screeched. The empty space next to me was soon filled with Nico's long body, the smell of cigarette smoke and his aftershave assaulting me. I felt Nico look down at me, eyes trailing a blaze down my face to my arm and to my hand. Nico let out a curt noise when he saw my bruised knuckles, and I immediately shoved my hand under the table and out of sight.

I could barely pay attention to the lesson, Ms. Levenson's voice drifting in and out as I tried not to think about Nico's body next to me, though the more I tried not to think about it the more it invaded my mind.

"Now, go to chapter 14 and answer the sample questions there. We'll go through the answers at the end of class, and I'll be picking random people to

answer them so you all better work." A chorus of groans erupted and Ms. Levenson smiled with satisfaction, walking back to her desk after pushing up her glasses. I didn't notice the wary glance the teacher gave Nico as she walked past, cracking open my textbook to the right page.

"I don't have a textbook," I heard Nico say next to me, his body moving a little closer to mine, making me flinch.

"So?" I replied, forcing my voice to stay steady, though it only came out sounding strained. I felt Nico sigh next to me, his hand reaching out to pull my textbook closer towards him as he shuffled his chair closer, his hip brushing against mine. "What are you doing?" I hissed at him under my breath, glancing around the room as Nico just smirked. As I thought, people were watching us with beady eyes. A few people had the decency to pretend they weren't looking, peering occasionally from behind their books. Others were just blatantly staring, textbooks not even open as they found us far more interesting than plant reproduction. I felt Alyssa's cool gaze on my back, her mouth set into a deep scowl as she chewed loudly on her gum.

"You can at least share your book with me after you punched me in the face," Nico said, and I yelped, giving him a fearful look. Nico just looked at me, a small smile on his face as he pointed to the richly-coloured bruise on his face. "It *really* hurts, you know. Had to ice it for the rest of the weekend. You also cut my lip, it was bleeding for-fucking-ever. I think you may have knocked a tooth loose as well... where is it... oh yeah, there it is. I think it's about to come out..."

"Please stop," I pleaded, Nico chuckling as I lowered my head, biting my lip nervously. Covering my eyes with my hands, pressing on them until I saw red spots, Nico spoke beside me again, voice a little softer.

"No one's ever punched me after sleeping with me," Nico whispered softly enough so only I could hear, and I let out a choked noise, turning to him. "Slapped, maybe, but never punched. It was kind of exciting."

"That's so fucking gross," I said, face twisting in disgust as Nico laughed, louder this time. Ms. Levenson looked up from her desk, eyes angry until she saw me paling, choosing to look down at her papers instead. Other

students turned towards the noise, eyes wide with shock as they saw Nico smiling down at me, amusement glimmering in his blue eyes.

"Why did you punch me, though?" Nico asked, genuinely curious. I gave him a surprised look, as if it was stupid of him to not know the answer.

"You know why," I said slowly, Nico shaking his head.

"I don't."

"You *do* ," I reiterated, Nico just shaking his head again, leaning his head on his palm.

"I really don't, Wes."

Wes.

I hated the way I shivered when he said my name, reminding me of how he said it when we had slept together. Damn him for having that rough, sultry voice.

Ignoring the gooseflesh that had popped up on my arm, I turned away from Nico's form.

"I'm not gay," I said quietly, Nico humming.

"Neither am I," he replied, and I gave him an incredulous look. "I told you, remember? You're the first guy I slept with."

"And you seemed to be surprisingly okay with it," I said, frowning.

"You did too," Nico said, smiling. "You seemed very enthusiastic, actually."

"I was drunk!" I snapped loudly, a little too loudly since Ms. Levenson looked up, alarmed. Giving her an apologetic smile, she just narrowed her eyes and looked back down, muttering something under her breath. "That's the only reason it happened. I just had a... lapse in judgement."

"But you liked it," Nico said, making me blush. Nico's smile widened, a few wrinkles forming at the corner of his eyes as the smile travelled up his face. "You're not honest, but your body definitely is. I would know."

"Oh my God," I groaned, head dropping into my hands. Nico just chuckled again, leaning back in his chair, the heat radiating off his skin leaving my side.

"You're coming over on Saturday to finish our project, right?" Nico asked, eyes alight as I grimaced.

"Do I have a choice?" I replied, sullen, and Nico shook his head. "When?"

"Whenever you want," Nico said, thinking for a moment before pulling out his phone and unlocking it. I looked at him blankly as he pressed the sleek device into my hand, the chipped screen rough under my fingers.

"What's this for?" I asked, head tilting to the side. Nico just snorted, sinking deeper into his chair as he got comfortable.

"Give me your number," Nico said simply, and I gawked at him. "And then call yourself so you have mine."

"We're not allowed phones in class," I blurted out, Nico snorting, giving Ms. Levenson a look as she looked up, eyes narrowed. I quickly shoved the phone under the back of my textbook, Nico grinning. Once the teacher's eyes were back down again, though the vein in her forehead seemed to throb a little harder, I turned to Nico who just gestured to the phone in my hand. Sighing, I quickly punched in my number and called myself, wondering if the phone in my locker was on silent. Quickly shutting off the call a few seconds in, I handed the device back to Nico, who looked down at my details quickly.

"Wesley Dillon," Nico read out, and I tensed at my full name on his lips.

"I'll call you when I'm coming over," I said, resigned, and Nico nodding as he grinned, getting up from his chair. I frowned as he began to walk out of the classroom, Ms. Levenson calling his name in a frustrated voice, Nico

ignoring it completely. Before he disappeared from sight, I saw him quickly typing something into his phone, turning to give me one last look with a shake of his phone, the door closing him off from view.

"If he thinks that he can just walk out like that, I swear-" Ms. Levenson huffed, face red. Turning to me, Ms. Levenson's face was stony. "Don't associate yourself with him, Wesley. He's a bad influence, and you have so much going for you."

Smiling weakly at Ms. Levenson, I sunk a little deeper into my chair, my head and heart heavy.

I think it's already too late.

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"You survived the canteen, congratulations," Sofia laughed beside me, her voice a light, airy chime through the hustle of the dining hall. Walking outside, the two of us left Benny to fend for himself in the crowd, walking over to our usual dining table outside. Leo, Rachel and Parker were already sitting there, and I warmed when I saw that they had left enough space for the rest of us to join them. Sofia lowered herself down first, pulling her skirt beneath her butt before sitting, and pat the space next to her. I followed her cue and plopped myself down, cracking open the plastic container of lasagne I had bought from the canteen.

"I heard a funny little rumour today," Parker said, leaning across the table with a worrying gleam in his eye. "It involves you and..."

"Nico Beckett. I heard it too," Rachel piped up, looking up from her book as the conversation started to interest her. I blanched as Leo nodded, obviously having heard the rumour - whatever it was about - as well. Sofia was the only one to look confused, and I ignored the way she immediately turned to me, eyes questioning.

"What rumour?" Sofia asked, and I shrugged my shoulders, Parker laughing with excitement.
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"I heard that this morning, Nico went over to Wes and threatened to kill him," Parker said, Sofia's mouth popping open with concern, her hand squeezing my arm. Her hand was warm, and I smiled a little at the genuine worry that she had on her face, chocolate brown eyes downcast.

"I heard that Wes talked back and Nico stormed off after almost punching him," Rachel said, Sofia's face growing darker and darker.

"I heard that Nico pulled you behind the school and taught you a lesson, but since you're still breathing I guess that rumour isn't right," Leo said, giving me a once over and deciding that I didn't look like I was on the brink of death. I made sure to turn my hand palm-up to hide my bruised knuckles from sight.

"None of those things happened," I said, sighing, Sofia loosening her grip with relief.

"Oh, good," Sofia said, giving me a smile. "He's... bad news. You're not the type to get involved with him, anyway."

The only thing I could do was laugh dryly at her words, fork picking at the lasagne in front of me.

"The canteen was a bloodbath today," Benny cried out from beside me, his body plopping down in front of me. His hair was wild on top of his head, and his clothes looked like they had been pulled this way and that in the scuffle, his tie almost undone and one button about to fall off. Parker laughed at Benny's appearance, plucking the fraying button off in amusement. Benny groaned, snatching the button from Parker's fingers, sighing before slipping it into his pocket. Quickly taking a bite of his chicken wrap, Benny turned to the others. "Did I miss anything?"

"Just talking about Wes and Nico," Parker said, grinning as Benny choked on his wrap.

"Oh my God, that was so fucking terrifying this morning," Benny said, as the others looked at him, shocked.

" *What?* " Sofia asked, glancing at Benny as he hastily swallowed.

"Yeah, Nico came up to us this morning and he full on glared at us," Benny said, shaking as he pointed to his eyes, creasing them as he tried to emulate Nico's natural expression. "If looks could kill..."

"Wait, so the rumours are true?" Rachel asked, voice squeaky as she looked at me, her interest in the gossip barely hidden beneath her thick glasses.

"They're not!" I exclaimed, shaking my head adamantly. "I mean, he did talk to me, but he didn't kill me. Or want to kill me. I don't think."

"Oh, so you guys are friends?" Parker scoffed, incredulous at the idea of Nico actually having friends.

"We're not friends," I said, the words somehow sour on my tongue.

Friends isn't the right word for it.

"We're doing a project in bio together, that's why he was talking to me," I said, Sofia frowning.

"He's making you do all the work, isn't he?" Sofia asked, her voice a little bitter. "He was already held back a year, he probably just wants to use you to boost his grades."

"That's not wh-" I started, clamping my mouth shut before I could finish, surprised at what I was about to say.

Why am I defending him?

"It doesn't matter," I said, chewing on the bland pasta, looking away. "We won't talk to each other after we finish the assignment anyway."

"That's good," Sofia breathed out, gently touching my arm. "It's probably best not to hang around him a lot. He has nothing ahead of him, he's just trouble." I found myself frowning a little at her words, but didn't want to probe to deep as to why.

"You sound like Ms. Levenson," I said, Sofia laughing. As if she suddenly remembered something, Sofia was a flurry of movement as she fumbled around the table for her phone, which was wedged under Leo's lunch box. Wiping off a piece of lettuce that had fallen on it, gagging a little, Sofia flicked through some images on her phone before settling on a brightly coloured one, thick words emblazoned across the screen. It looked like an advertisement of some sort.

"Guys, this new Italian restaurant finally opened up around the corner from my place and I've been dying to try it out," Sofia said, showing me the screen before passing it around the table. "Want to come with me on Saturday? There's a big discount for the rest of the week. Their menu looks amazing, I'm already drooling." Turning to me, Sofia's eyes were bright as her cheeks reddened. "Can you come, Wes?"

Nico.

"I'm meeting Nico to work on our project that day," I said, Sofia's face falling. "...But I'll probably be done by dinner." It was almost comical how quickly Sofia perked up again, nodding with excitement.

"Great! What about you guys?" Sofia said, turning to the others. Parker had a sly smile on his face, and I saw his hand move under the table, Rachel jumping suddenly. Leo just smiled to himself as Benny hummed, giving me a funny look.

"I-I'm going out with my family that day," Rachel said, hiding her smile behind her sandwich. "Sorry."

"Footy club has a group dinner that day, so I'm out as well," Leo said, shrugging his shoulders.

"I'm... just busy," Parker said, snickering. " *Reaaally* busy."

"Benny?" I asked, my friend thinking about it for a long, long time, Parker trying not to burst out laughing at my friend's exaggeratedly pensive expression.

"Nah, I'm no good either, sorry," Benny said, though his face did not look apologetic in the slightest. "Gotta help my mum out with something. You know, being a good son and all that."

"Really guys?" Sofia whined, gesturing to her phone again. "Pizza. Pasta. Cheap, delicious Italian."

"Sorry, we're all busy," Parker said, waving away Sofia's advances. "You can go with Wes though!" I pretended to ignore the desperate, nervous look Sofia gave Parker, the boy just wiggling a brow.

"Fine," Sofia huffed, turning to me shyly. "Um... I'll meet you there at six?"

"Sounds good," I said, Benny laughing as I also blushed a little. "Uh... you're okay getting there yourself?"

"Yeah, I live around the corner, remember?" Sofia laughed, and I blushed a little deeper, Parker choking on his drink as he struggled to laugh.

"Oh, right. Um, yeah, well, sounds good."

"Real smooth," Benny said under his breath, my toe hitting his shin immediately after. The rest of lunch was uneventful, but I couldn't help the nagging itch at the back of my mind that I was getting myself into something that I didn't really want to, but I didn't know if it was Nico or Sofia that was the cause.

And frankly, I didn't want to know.

TEN

I stood impatiently in front of Nico's door, the bright white walls blinding as they reflected the morning sun. The dial tone kept ringing and ringing, until finally there was a crackle and a rough, tired groan. I swallowed as the voice spoke, the sound so close to my ear it was as if he was standing right next to me.

"It's too fucking early, Wes," Nico complained, annoyance clouding his tone as I scoffed.

"You said I could come any time," I countered, Nico growling into the receiver. "And it's already 10am." I heard the light thump of footsteps upstairs, stepping backwards to look into the window. As I did so, the curtains which had been drawn were wearily parted, revealing Nico's sleep-tousled black hair and bleary blue eyes looking down. My breath caught as I couldn't help but stare at his naked chest, his lower half blocked off by the bottom of the window. I found myself giving Nico a small wave, face flat, as the boy just huffed.

"Spare key is under the rock next to the Rosemallows," Nico said, and I looked around. In a sea of colourful flowers, I didn't know what Rosemallows were. Nico seemed to have seen my confusion through the window, sighing. "They're the red-orange ones... no, not those ones. Left... left... no, too far left. Next to the Hydrangeas. Yep, there you go." Nico hung up abruptly once I had found the Rosemallows, and I grumbled as I finally found the rock he was talking about, picking out the key from under it. Letting myself into his house, I loitered around the entrance for a few minutes, waiting for Nico.

He didn't come down.

"Nico?" I called, my voice answered by a muffled 'upstairs'. Gritting my teeth, I slowly walked up the familiar stairs, hands gripping my backpack tightly. Knocking on Nico's door and receiving no answer, I popped my

head inside. Peering around I couldn't see Nico anywhere, but the door to his bathroom was slightly ajar with the light on, the sound of water running. *He's fucking showering? Now? While I'm waiting for him?* I laughed incredulously as I glared at the bathroom door. Carefully stepping around his clothes on the floor, I stood beside his desk, grimacing as I plucked off some of the clothes that were covering his chair and sat down on it. The screws screeched with my weight, and I let out a tense sigh as I gently spun in the chair.

Growing bored, I looked at all the things on Nico's desk - some school books that looked untouched, a few sports trophies from many years ago, some more discarded clothes, drained bottles of alcohol and a few empty cartons of smokes. At the back of the desk was a small, dust-covered photo frame, and I carefully plucked it out from the pile.

Inside it was the picture of an older woman, hair only beginning to go grey, and a young boy with short black hair and bright blue eyes. His gapped smile was wide as the older woman hugged him from behind, her wrinkled face soft as she looked down at the boy.

"Huh," I said, wiping the dust off the glass to see the image more clearly, the boy definitely a younger, more innocent Nico Beckett. "So he was actually a pretty cute kid. Too bad he turned into *that* ."

As I said that, the door to the bathroom opened, revealing a freshly showered Nico. I nearly dropped the photo frame as he emerged, hair dripping down his neck, the water droplets dribbling down his pecs to dangle from his pert nipple. There was the faint shadow of stubble across his chin having just woken up, his lip ring slick. My throat was thick as his skin gleamed, his muscles wet and disappearing down into the towel that was wrapped around his waist. Nico noticed me staring, and chuckled deeply. The sound cut through my rapture, and I quickly got up from the chair, striding over to his wardrobe.

"I'll bring the beans downstairs," I said, pulling the large box from the upper shelf of the wardrobe, struggling a little with the height and the size of the box, not wanting to drop everything on the floor. I gasped as I felt something wet press against my back, Nico's hands rising up beside mine to

steady the box, helping bring it down. As he did so, his hands never left the box and ended up encircling me from behind. I felt some water drip down the back of my T-shirt, my fingers fumbling.

"Careful," Nico said, voice beside my ear as if he were speaking through the phone. "Wouldn't want to start again, after all of your hard work."

"Sorry," I said quickly, tightening my grip on the box as I shoved his arms away from my with my shoulder, Nico smirking. Face drawn, I quickly walked downstairs as Nico laughed behind me, the sound disappearing by the time I reached the kitchen. Face hot, I slapped my cheeks as I tried to calm myself, the back of my neck still damp with Nico's shower water. The liquid had soaked into the collar of my T-shirt and smelled like his shampoo.

"Shit," I muttered, shaking my head as I unpacked the box of petri dishes, lining them up side by side. I had unloaded everything by the time Nico came down, face freshly shaven and his body fully clothed (thankfully). His hair was still damp, but not dripping anymore, and pushed back from his face. Nico walked past me to reach for some bread, chucking it into the toaster before pulling out some butter and Vegemite, putting them on the bench next to the petri dishes.

"Want anything?" Nico asked, pointing to the bread in his hands. I shook my head, Nico shrugging as the toaster pinged. Quickly pulling out his toast and putting them onto a plate, he sat in the chair across from me and began to spread his toast. I found myself watching him perform this mundane task in a daze, not quite registering that *the* Nico Beckett was buttering his toast in front of me.

"Sure you don't want anything? You look hungry," Nico said, eyes gleaming. "Unless it's not toast you're hungry for..."

"I'm full!" I yelled, Nico laughing as I huffed, pulling out my books and materials.

"Mhmm," was all Nico said in response, chewing on his toast. "So what do we have to do today?"

" *We?* " I scoffed, managing to give Nico an unimpressed glare. "As if you're going to help at all."

"I will if you ask nicely," Nico said with a quirk of his lips.

"I'd rather do it myself," I replied coldly, Nico chuckling.

"If you insist," Nico said, returning to his breakfast as I rolled my eyes. Pulling out the first petri dish, I tried to straighten one of the curled sprouts out to measure its length, recording it into my notebook. I ignored Nico's watchful eyes as I repeated the same thing multiple times, slowly going through each of the petri dishes. Since we had so many dishes and so many sprouts in each dish, it was taking me a long time to get through them, especially since I had to keep moving from my ruler to my notebook. As I was about to write another measurement down, the paper was pulled from beneath me and the pen plucked from my fingers. Nico just silently clicked the pen in his fingers a few times, before turning up to look at me.

"Measurement?" he asked, and I narrowed my eyes. Nico's eyes softened just a touch, and I found myself warming. "It'll take you until dinner to finish it at this rate."

"...Four," I said, Nico nodding. Paper scratched in his messy scrawl, I glanced over to make sure he was doing it right. Satisfied, I measured the next sprout.

"Five." Pen scratching. "Four." Scratch. "Uh... 4.5." Scratch.

The next hour continued much like this, the two of us only talking when I had to change a measurement or there was a strange number. It was midday by the time we had finished everything, my notebook and stationery packed neatly into my bag. Pulling all of the dishes into a large garbage bag, knotted at the top, I pulled my backpack onto my shoulders.

"I'll throw these out on my way past the bin," I told Nico, and he looked at me hesitantly for a second, before stepping forward to take the rubbish from my hands.

"I'm hungry," Nico said, and I raised a brow.

"Good to know," I replied, voice probing as I was wondering where his random statement was leading. Nico just smiled a little at my response, dropping the rubbish bag by the door.

"Have lunch with me," Nico said, and I took a step back.

" *Together* ?" I asked, incredulous, and Nico just chuckled. "What? *Hell* no."

"Why?" Nico asked, and I let out a mocking noise.

"Because I don't want to?" I replied, Nico just stepping forward, a small smile on his face.

"Aren't you hungry?" Nico asked, advancing further as I took another step back.

"I'm not," I replied, my stomach bubbling in response. Nico just grinned wider at my body's honest reaction, his hand reaching for my wrist. I didn't fight him when he gently tugged my arm towards him, leading me back into the kitchen. Glumly, I sat on one of the counter stools, Nico letting go of my wrist to walk to the fridge. Lips pursed in though, Nico peeked from around the open door of the fridge to look at me.

"Is there anything you don't eat?" Nico asked, and I shrugged.

"I'm not picky," I replied, Nico nodding. Rummaging around for a moment longer, Nico came back to the counter with an array of ingredients in his hands. Having expected him to just pull out bread and sandwich ingredients, I was surprised to find lots of fresh vegetables, meat and spices.

"It won't take too long for me to make lunch," Nico assured me as my stomach rumbled again, making me blush.

"You're making lunch?" I asked, apprehensive. Nico's eyes just crinkled as he gave me a small smile, not saying anything as he got to work. I watched him - in awe and shock - as he comfortably chopped up the vegetables and

meats like he had done it many times before. His mouth was constantly curled into a soft smile as he sliced and diced, the sizzle of the pan almost calming as I watched him work.

Nico Beckett was cooking. For me.

"I didn't know you could cook," I said, the silence suddenly stifling. Nico just laughed, leaning back a little as the oil sputtered in the pan.

"There are a lot of things you don't know," Nico said, not turning around. When he said the words aloud, I realised that they were painfully true.

I knew very little about Nico Beckett, and the only things I did know were said from the mouths of others. After school on Monday, where rumours were rife about the two of us, I had realised that maybe, just maybe, the things that I thought I knew about him may not have been true. Yeah, he was rude, he smoked, his work ethic at school was complete shit and he more often than not had his tongue shoved down some willing girl's throat, he hadn't been even half of the things people had said that he was. He wasn't perfect, or even *nice* , but he wasn't *bad* .

Don't associate yourself with him, Wesley. He's a bad influence.

Ms. Levenson's words, and Sofia's as well, drifted into my mind. But with him cooking in front of me, that gentle smile on his face and midday glow on his cheeks, I couldn't help but think that I wanted to know more about Nico Beckett.

"Done," Nico said as a bowl appeared in front of my eyes. A creamy pasta dish sat beneath my nose, the white sauce smelling rich and decadent. Herbed chicken rested on top of it, alongside some brightly coloured vegetables. My mouth salivated with the smell, and I carefully lifted up my fork as Nico came to sit next to me, a similar bowl in his hands. Nico immediately stuffed some of the pasta into his mouth, nodding at the taste. Following his lead, I gently popped one pasta tube into my mouth, eyes widening. It was delicious.

"It's good," I said, mouth still full as Nico smiled, eyes bright.

"Your face doesn't seem to be lying this time," Nico said, my cheeks immediately flushing, making him laugh. "So honest."

"Shut up," I said, too tired to argue as I continued to eat. The kitchen was quiet as the two of us continued to devour our lunch, and I grew curious with the quietness. "Nico...?" I started, Nico humming with acknowledgement. Clearing my throat, I turned to him.

"Does anyone else live here? Every time I've come, you've been the only one here... even... that night," I said, averting my eyes as Nico smirked.

"My grandma lives here too, but she's usually out on Saturdays. She volunteers in town," Nico said, and I nodded. "And *that* night, she was visiting a friend and stayed over. Don't worry."

"I wasn't worrying!" I blurted out, giving Nico a harsh look as he just grinned slyly. Silence took over us again, and we didn't speak until both of our bowls were empty.

"I'll do the dishes," I said, reaching forward to grab Nico's empty dishes, his hand snatching mine before I could reach it. His fingers were tight around my hand, warm and rough. A choked noise was dislodged from my throat as Nico's mouth fitted itself over mine, tasting of the pasta we had just shared. I couldn't move even as his lips did, parting slightly as his tongue flicked over my lips. My mouth opened easily, Nico smiling against me as he pushed deeper, a low moan leaving me as I melted into his touch, unable to control myself.

Before I could lean forward, Nico had already pulled back, lips a glossy smile as he got up from his chair, picking up the dishes from the table to walk over to the sink.

"Why did you..." I asked breathlessly, Nico leaning against the edge of the sink, grinning as I ran my fingers over my lips.

"Wondering if it would feel the same when we weren't drunk," Nico said, and I swallowed thickly, lips still tingling.

"And did it?" I asked, voice quiet. Nico thought for a moment, my heart hammering.

"I don't know," Nico said truthfully. Meeting his eyes, I realised that I felt the same way. When he kissed me, it felt both the same but different. Familiar but scarily new.

One thing I knew though, was that it felt *good* .

"I-I've got to go," I stammered, getting up from the chair. Nico didn't stop me as I gathered my things, turning sharply. "I'll take the rubbish out with me." As I opened the door, I heard Nico's voice call out from behind me, making me tremble.

"See you on Monday, Wes."

ELEVEN

Sofia was already waiting at the restaurant by the time I arrived, even though I was early. I could see her through the front window of the store, her face half obscured by the freshly painted sign across the glass. *'Nicoletta's'* was emblazoned across the glass in bright red font rimmed with white, the cursive bold and crisp. I grimaced a little at the name that bore a strong resemblance to someone else's, my lips immediately feeling chapped. I pushed the unsettled feeling aside as I stepped in, a small bell above the door dinging, making a few patrons glance over at me, including Sofia. I found myself relaxing as she waved me over, a soft smile on her face.

Out of her school uniform, Sofia looked a little different than how I was used to seeing her; a loose dress hung over her petite body in flowing layers, the black fabric speckled with small red flowers and modestly hiding her well-developed curves. Her thick brown hair was pulled up high onto her head, secured with a red clip. A few stray wisps spilled from their confines and fluttered against her rosy cheeks, which pulled upwards as she smiled at me. Her brown eyes were rimmed with a little liner, making them seem even larger and more doe-eyed, and she had a little pink dabbed onto her lips, which glistened slightly under the low lighting. While she wore no makeup at school, she had popped a little on, highlighting her already pretty features with muted expression.

"Sorry I'm late," I said, Sofia just laughing, waving her hand.

"You're still early," Sofia said, a small smile on her plush lips. "It's nice to know that you're punctual. God knows Leo and Parker aren't." I laughed at that, sitting down across from Sofia. A candle flickered on the table between us, the freshly laid white table cloth scraping the tops of my thighs. My leg bumped Sofia's beneath the table, the girl's face only changing for a fleeting moment before returning to its gentle smile, her cheeks only a little pinker. I ignored the slight change in her complexion as I plucked up one of the menus from the table, eyes scanning the contents quickly, my mouth

salivating. The taste of Nico's pasta was long gone from my tongue, but I could remember its flavour so vividly.

I suddenly got a strong whiff of Sofia's perfume, a sweet fruity scent that clung to her neck. I coughed nervously as Sofia's eyes dropped down to look at the menu, her glossy lips pursed as she pondered over the small print.

"I think I'm gonna get the risotto," Sofia said, brow creased before she sighed. "Or the prawn linguine. Or the carbonara."

"Anything you *don't want?"* I laughed, Sofia kicking my shin under the table.

"Shut up," Sofia laughed, twirling a stray lock of hair around her finger.

"If you want I could get the carbonara and you get the risotto? I'll let you have some of mine," I said, and Sofia's eyes lit up, her cheeks warming.

"Really?" Sofia leaned over the table, her hand resting over mine. I gulped as her thumb ran over my skin in a slow, smooth circle. Her hands were soft, the pad of her finger fleshy and hot.

"Y-Yeah, they both sound good so..." I started, cursing myself as I felt myself blushing. Sofia's eyes trailed over my face, the smile on her own deepening as she looked down at our hands.

"Thanks, Wes..." Sofia said, her eyes returning to mine. Lashes blinked as her thumb stilled, her fingers instead squeezing my hand tight. "Um... you probably know but I kind of-"

A brusque cough from beside our table made us both jump, Sofia's hand retracting in a flash as my own darted to my lap. My elbow hit the back of my chair and the jolt sent tingles up my arm, my eyes wincing a little. A waiter tapped on his notepad impatiently, Sofia turning crimson as I looked down at the menu as if it were a priceless work of art.

"Ready to order?" the waiter sighed, his flat words sounding more like an order than a question. Sofia nodded as I quickly pointed to the two menu items with my index finger, the waiter ripping the paper out of my hands as soon as he was done jotting down our order. Sofia and I were silent as the waiter walked away quickly, the tail of his waist apron flickering across his hip.

"Well he was charming," I said, breaking the silence as Sofia snorted, a wry grin on her face. The silence overcame the two of us again, Sofia fiddling with the hem of her dress as I tapped my finger on the glass of water in front of me.

"I-"

"Do-"

The two of us spoke simultaneously, both clearly starting to grow uncomfortable with the silence between us. Sofia blushed again and laughed, and I coughed as I scratched the back of my neck.

"You go," I said, Sofia smiling.

"Do you... um..." Sofia started, eyes darting across the table nervously. She seemed to steel her nerves as she let out a heavy breath, before forcing her eyes to meet mine. "Girlfriend. Do you... have a... girlfriend." Sofia's words were choppy, and she bit her lip after getting the words out. I blinked at her, mouth popping open as she fidgeted in her chair. "I-I mean, I'm just curious... since you're... um... a really nice guy and..."

"I don't," I said, cutting her off as her mouth began to spurt out words. Her mouth immediately closed as she registered what I had said, and the smile that sprouted on her face made me warm. The corners of her mouth quivered as she tried to hide the beaming smile on her face, but her muscles denied her will. Instead, Sofia quickly grabbed her cup and pressed it to her lips to disguise her smile, but it didn't do much at all.

Adorable.

"Do you have a boyfriend?" I asked her, though I already knew the answer. Sofia snorted and shook her head wildly, waving her hands in front of her like she was trying to dispel a horrendous smell.

"God, no!" Sofia said, crinkling her nose. "Guys don't really pay attention to girls like me." Sofia laughed lightly, my head cocking to the side.

"Really? I don't see why they wouldn't pay attention to you," I said, my words soft. It was Sofia's turn to stare at me, mouth agape, as her ears began to turn red.

"W-well, I don't mind if they don't... Except for certain people," Sofia looked up at me through her lashes, eyes hopeful. My throat suddenly became dry as my words caught in my throat. I began to feel a little sick as Sofia leaned forward, her perfume attacking me senses again. Her hand crept its way across the table, her fingertips brushing my knuckles coyly.

"Sofia..." I started, eyes tearing themselves from hers as I gulped. The sickening feeling in my stomach increased as I felt her leg brush against mine beneath the table. "I-"

"Who ordered the risotto," a slightly peeved voice called from the side, Sofia yelping as the two of us bolted back in our chairs, almost toppling over. The waiter sighed as he balanced our plates on his arms, the white porcelain wobbling. " *The risotto?* "

"O-oh, that's mine," Sofia said, raising her hand shakily, the steaming plate immediately landing on the table in front of her.

"And the carbonara for you," the waiter said, turning away before I could even say thank you to wait on another table. Though rude, I was grateful for his timely interruption, the skin where Sofia was touching still tingling.

"Wes, I..." Sofia started, and I coughed loudly, my throat itching.

"Don't worry, I'll remember to save you some of mine," I said hurriedly, giving Sofia a smile though I did not want to meet her eyes. Sofia just laughed quietly, the two of us digging our forks into our dishes.

As I put the first bite of pasta into my mouth, the creamy sauce coating my tongue thickly, I could only think of how it didn't taste quite as nice as Nico's pasta.

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Sofia shivered a little as the wind blew against her bare arms as the door to Nicoletta's closed behind us. Although the days were still warm, the nights were chilly, and Sofia's arms were speckled with gooseflesh.

"Sorry, I didn't bring a jumper," I said, Sofia shrugging as she stroked her arms, trying to warm herself with the friction.

"It's okay, my house is around the corner anyway," Sofia said, smiling a little at my gesture. "Thanks, though." Sofia nudged my arm with her elbow in thanks, though her hands stayed tight against her biceps. The two of us began to walk towards her house, the two of us chatting softly about school, exams and every other mundane topic we could pull out of our heads. As we walked, Sofia had warmed up somewhat, her hands falling from her arms to her side. As we walked side by side, I stiffened every time the back of her hand brushed mine as our hands swung at our thighs.

Brush.

My step faltered slightly, as Sofia's hand touched mine again. From the corner of my eye I could see Sofia biting her lip.

Brush.

Sofia's touch lingered for a little longer this time, and I realised that, at least now, the hand touches weren't by chance. Sofia stepped a little closer to me, though she didn't look upwards, and instead kept her eyes trained on the cracked pavement beneath our feet.

Brush .

With another touch, I carefully glanced down at the crown of Sofia's head. Her brown hair had long since begun to slip from her bun, and as if she
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could feel my eyes on her, a slender hand deftly latched onto the elastic and tugged. Brown hair fell free, falling in loose curls down her back. I breathed in the sudden burst of the scent of her shampoo as her hair dropped, and my mouth became parched again.

"This is my place," Sofia said, turning to me as we neared a modestly-sized two-storey home. The garden was neatly trimmed and the grass freshly cut, the outer walls a monotone shade of grey. The tiled roof was a darker shade, and there was a little smoke wafting out of the chimney. Light glowed through the parted curtains inside the house and I could make out the faint sound of a television running. "Thanks for walking me back, you didn't have to."

"I wanted to," I said, and Sofia smiled, her hand brushing mine as she turned towards my fully. Her eyes were large and warm as she stared up at me, her pink tongue nervously darting across her lips which still had some traces of her lipstick across them. My stomach twisted as my eyes dropped to her mouth, which was glistening as she bit on her plump lower lip. Taking a hasty step back, I cleared my throat, my hand balling into a tight fist.

"Thanks for dinner, Sof," I said, giving Sofia a small smile, which she returned earnestly. "I'll see you at school on Monday." Turning to leave, I took half a step before Sofia's hand tightly gripped my own, pulling me to a stop.

"Wait, Wes," Sofia said, her voice quiet behind me. Her fingers were a little clammy, and I could feel her nerves through my skin as she trembled, though it may have been from the cold breeze that blew past us.

"Yeah?" I asked, turning around to see Sofia looking at me seriously.

"Do you not... you know... like me?" Sofia asked, her voice meek as doubt played across her features as the moonlight cast shapes across her face through the clouds.

"Of course I like you," I said quickly, Sofia's face darkening as she shook her head.

"Not... as a friend," Sofia said, her hand tightening around mine. I felt my own hands become a little slick with sweat as Sofia took a step closer to me, her body almost touching mine. If I inhaled deeply enough, I would probably meet her full breasts with my chest. "Do you *like* like me?"

"Sofia..."

"Wes," Sofia whispered, her eyes closing as she extinguished the space between us, pressing her lips onto mine. The first thing I could taste was her lipstick, strangely sweet but bitter at the same time. Her lips were soft, much softer than Nico's, and were a little clunky and awkward on top of mine. Sofia was stiff as her hand gripped the front of my shirt, and as if she suddenly realised what she was doing, her finger detangled themselves swiftly as she stumbled back, a look of horror on her face.

"Oh my god, I'm so sor-" Sofia started, her words lost as I gently snaked an arm around her shapely waist and pulled her back, planting my mouth over hers again. I didn't know what came over me, to want to feel her against me again, but that unsettled feeling washed over me as I felt Sofia begin to relax into my arms, her hands coming to rest on my waist.

When we pulled back, both of our chests heaving and our lips the same shade of pink lipstick, Sofia smiled shyly at me in bliss. I pulled my lips in an upwards arc to match her, though I couldn't quite make it reach my eyes. With her eyes lingering on my mouth, Sofia didn't seem to notice that the smile didn't reach any further.

"That was my, um, first kiss," Sofia whispered, and my eyes widened, suddenly feeling an immense sense of guilt. Sofia caught my expression, and laughed as she always did, her eyes crinkling as she covered my her mouth with the back of her hand to stifle her laughter. "Don't worry, Wes. It was nice."

"Good... I guess?" I managed to reply, and Sofia laughed again, her finger brushing over her lips slightly.

"I'll see you on Monday?" Sofia then whispered, her head turning as she heard the sound of movement inside the house. Before the door opened,

Sofia gave me a quick kiss on the cheeks, before stepping back, the front door opening.

"Sofia, you're home?" a gentle, female voice called, the light on the front doorstep flickering on as a woman appeared inside the frame. She had the same brown hair as Sofia, though it was streaked with grey near her crown and shortly cropped to her shoulders. Her eyes were lined with wrinkles that told the story of a life well-lived and laughed, and her petit body was swathed in loose sweatpants and a large T-shirt. Spotting me, the woman blushed a little as she quickly straightened her homely attire, giving the two of us a knowing smile.

"I'm coming now, mum!" Sofia said, blushing as she quickly gave me a parting smile, before slipping inside the house. As the door closed behind her, I simply stood there for a moment, trying to settle the discomfort in my chest as I wiped the traces of lipstick off my mouth with the back of my hand. Stepping down the sidewalk, the street too quiet and my mind too loud, I tried to squash the thoughts that plagued me, thoughts that made me both guilty and nauseous at the same time.

You only kissed her again because you wanted to see if it was different with Sofia. With a girl.

Different from Nico.

And was it?

I knew the answer all too well.

TWELVE

The card reader beeped as I pressed my transport card against the graffitied surface, my dismal card balance making me grimace a little before tucking the card into the pocket of my pants. As Autumn had broken, the hot mornings had slowly been descending into mildly chilly ones, though the sun still shone bright in the sky. I pulled my jumper sleeves down my hands so they covered my fingers, my backpack heavy on my shoulders.

I slowly walked to my usual seat under the platform's roof and sat down, earphone jammed into my left ear as I glanced around. Other students were loitering around with their friends, pants hanging low and shirt sleeves rolled up despite the cool morning. A few of them were leaning against the fencing, bags at their feet and cigarettes hanging from their fingers. I exhaled as I watched them drop their smokes onto the ground and grind them with their feet. I had never smoked a day in my life, but I knew the taste of them.

Nico tasted like them that night.

I groaned as the thought invaded my mind, my fingers pinching tightly against my nose bridge as I shook away the memory. After forcing myself to think about other things, I found comfort in the familiarity of the station now. The same business man stumbled across the platform, tie still half undone and briefcase barely closed as he checked his watch frantically, the fabric under his armpits dark as he ran to catch the train. The same woman wearing pointed heels and a tight pencil skirt sat stiffly on the other end of the bench, glasses pushed high up her sharp nose bridge and a steely frown on her thin lips. The same graffitied patterns lined the corrugated fencing on the other side of the platform, the chunky lettering overlapping others in blotchy bright neons and dripping blacks. The people and the walls here were the same day in day out, nothing ever changing.

But looking around me now, I realised that one thing had changed.

Me.

Everyone around me went about their day as if nothing had happened, but I knew that everything around me had changed. I was no longer a virgin, I had slept with Nico Beckett, I was questioning my sexuality despite pretending that I wasn't. I had kissed Sofia.

Sofia.

I groaned again, the uptight woman beside me giving me a glance, curious. She probably wondered what had gotten into me, since I usually sat there silently reading a book with my earphones in, oblivious to everything. Things had changed so quickly, and as hard as I was trying to outrun it, everything was catching up to me. I could feel it nipping at my heels.

There was a loud, prolonged blare of a horn as the train began to round the loose curve to my left. The sound made me jump up to my feet, the sharp-nosed woman giving me another amused glance as she too rose, but far more calmly than I had. Standing in the same place as I always did, knowing that Sofia sat in the same seat on the train in the same carriage as she always did, I felt sick to my stomach. After kissing her on Saturday, not knowing what we were now, or what I even *wanted* us to be, I felt sweat begin to build on the back of my neck despite the bumps on my skin.

As the train grew closer, I found myself stepping back behind the billboard in the centre of the platform. As the train slowed, brakes screeching against the metal tracks, one carriage passed. And then a second. And then Sofia's. I felt myself release a breath as the fourth carriage passed, my body quickly walking around the billboard and into the final carriage behind it. Slipping through the doors, I quickly walked towards an empty seat in the corner, dropping myself onto the chair. I quickly looked around the train carriage, and as if on cue, my phone vibrated in my pocket as a beep buzzed in my ear. Hands sweaty, I pulled my phone out and glanced at the bright screen.

Sofia - 7.58am
Hey,where are u?
The train's about to leave
Are u okay? Ur never late

I gulped as I felt the train sway as it began to move, and as it did, Sofia sent another message.

Sofia - 7.59am
Ur not avoiding me, right?

The dark print of Sofia's message glared up at me, the solid lines on the screen slapping me in the face as I realised that she was right. I was avoiding her. I could feel the uncertainty in her typed words, and imagined the hesitation in her thin fingers as she typed, screen directed away from Parker's prying eyes as she tried to school her face into nonchalance. I could see the way she bit her bottom lip nervously, fingers pushing away the baby hairs from her face as she waited for my reply, part of her wondering if it's better if I don't reply. Sometimes doubt is better than confirmation of your nightmares.

My fingers moved quickly but painfully, my nails clacking on the glass as I replied.

Wes - 8:00am
I'm not lol
I was late so I could only make it to the last carriage
The door was about to behead me I swear

Three dots immediately lit up at the bottom of the message reel, and I smiled a little. Sofia's relieved smile filled my mind, her fingers sending me a laughing emoji before replying textually.

Sofia - 8:00am
Ok good
I was worried since you didn't message me after
U know
Saturday

Guilt clawed itself up my throat but didn't make it to my fingers as I swallowed it back down.

Wes - 8:01am
Sorry, I was busy
Bio assignment is killing me

I paused for a moment before continuing, the guilt suffocating as I strangled it.

And I don't have a lot of experience
With this kinda thing

The text bubbles appeared again, though they lingered there for much longer than before. They disappeared and then reappeared, and I found myself gulping. If I didn't have much experience, neither did Sofia, and it was clear in the way she was struggling to find the words.

Sofia - 8:02am
Me neither...
I
Haven't talked to guys
Or kissed them
I don't want to rush anything
Especially not with you because I
Really like u, Wes
But u probs know that already

At the end of her message Sofia managed to send a blushing emoji, and I found myself chuckling a little. It really looked like her.

Wes - 8:04am
Slow is good
I'll see u at school?

Sofia - 8:05am
Of course :)
Oh shit
Parker keeps trying to look at my phone

I'll talk to u later
After I kill Parker

Wes - 8:05am
Just throw him out the window

Sofia - 8:05am
Already done

Smiling at my phone, I flicked the screen off and tucked the sleek device back into my pocket, closing my eyes.

Slow.

I could do slow. Slow would let me think about things, to let me get used to Sofia, to kissing her, to holding her. Slow could let me forget about Nico Beckett, who was everything my life did not need right now.

Everything was changing too fast, and I couldn't keep up.

~~~

"W-E-S," Benny's voice called from behind me, and I braced myself for impact moments before his arms slammed across my shoulders, his weight pressing against me.

"Benny," I said, sighing as he grinned, a little spark in his eye. My brow creased as he continued to give me *that* look, brow wiggling as he tightened his grip on my shoulders, almost pulling me into a headlock. " *What,* Benny?"

"So," Benny said, whistling a little as he glanced up at the ceiling. "I saw you and Sofia this morning. You two looked... close. If you catch my drift."

"Yeah, I caught it," I said, snorting as I elbowed Benny in his side, my friend grunting as my bone dug into his fleshy torso. "You're wrong though."
~~~

"Mhmm," Benny hummed, giving me a look that said that he didn't believe a word was coming out of my mouth, making me sigh again. "Suuuure Wes. That little hidden kiss she gave you on your cheek? Must've been seeing things."

" *Fine* ," I caved, crossing my arms as I gave Benny a hard look. "But don't tell anyone. We're... Well neither of us know *what* we are, and Sofia says she wants to take it slow. Since she's, you know..."

"A virgin?" Benny cackled, almost choking himself on his own laughter. "She does know that you're one too, right? Sure you're not taking it slow for your sake?"

I paled as Benny laughed, turning away from him to rummage through my locker for nothing in particular. My locker door, open at right angles to my locker, suddenly swung open wider, the bulge of the lock slamming against the locker beside it. The metallic clang made a few people turn their heads.

There was a smack of gum and the sickly sweet scent of fruity perfume as Alyssa tapped her manicured nails against the metal locker. Her hair was a bright platinum shade, freshly bleached over the weekend and was now cut short to her shoulders. Her eyes were rimmed with dark eyeliner and her lips a bright cherry red, her straight white teeth flashing as she chewed her gum.

"You need to stop making Nico work on your stupid little bio project on weekend. He doesn't go out with us anymore, and it's because of *you*, " Alyssa spat, eyes livid as she looked at me with her lips pulled back. One of her friends stood behind her like a shadow, her squeaky voice echoing exactly what Alyssa said. I struggled to not roll my eyes at the mass-produced cronies she had lining up behind her, but managed to just frown as I turned towards her.

"It's due next week, we have to work on it," I said, keeping my voice steady. Alyssa scoffed, picking the gum out of her mouth and plastering it on my locker door. My face twisted in disgust as the bright pink stretched against the metal, glossy and damp.

"You're smart, right? You can do it yourself," Alyssa said, crossing her arms over her ample chest, which pushed at the buttons spanning the valley between them.

"It's a *group* project," I retorted, Alyssa glaring at me as she growled, her hand flying out towards me. A small, surprised noise escaped my mouth as her sharp nails dug into the front of my wool jumper, stabbing into me.

"You're a fucking idiot, aren't you," Alyssa said, laughing coldly under her breath, her posse's own laughter echoing her own like a bad tape recording. "If you don't stop making Nico work on your stupid project this weekend, I swear that I'll-" Alyssa's fingers tightened, her head flicking to the side as her friend tapped her on the shoulder. Her taut face immediately relaxed as she let go of the front of my jumped, her hands quickly smoothing down the little amount of fabric she had around her body. Her eyes were trained behind me, making me turn around.

"Nico!" Alyssa yelled out, her voice impossibly high as she pushed past me with such force - which I knew was done on purpose - that my body slammed against the lockers. I grit my teeth as I watched her latch herself onto Nico, whose face only looked down at her in disinterest, almost bordering on annoyed. Alyssa didn't look dissuaded as she looped her arm around his, pressing his arm into the crevasse between her breasts as they walked down the hall together.

I held my breath as they walked past, my back straightening as my eyes followed Nico. His blue eyes never strayed from in front of him, even as he walked right in front of me. Alyssa, however, managed to shoot me a look, her mouth hissing something vicious as she sauntered past. I barely registered what she said as I watched Nico's back disappearing into the crowd.

Look at me.

I kept watching as Nico's head bobbed above the crowd, dark hair rising above a sea of colours less vibrant.

Don't ignore me.

Nico's head turned as he began to round a corner, his hands rummaging through his pockets to pull out a cigarette. Flicking the carton, he pulled one out with his lips.

Look at me.

Nico's head turned further, and just before he turned the corner, his eyes met mine, a piercing, violent blue. His lips pulled into a smirk as he caught me staring, the cigarette in his mouth bobbing. My chest felt tight as he finally disappeared from sight, and I finally regained my breath. Benny was shaking my arm, asking me about what the hell Alyssa wanted, but I could barely hear him over the relieved voice in my head.

He didn't ignore me.

A/N: Thanks for reading! <3

THIRTEEN

"Sorry, I have a training session during lunch," Leonard mumbled through a mouthful of sandwich, waving to us as he briskly walked past the table with his sports bag in hand. Sofia didn't even look up as she waved him good bye, too busy focusing on her meal to even look up.

"You glutton," I teased, Sofia giving me a faux frown as she poked me in the side, only able to hold the face for a moment before breaking out into a wide grin.

"Nothing is gonna get between me and my mum's pasta bake, alright?" Sofia said, stabbing her fork through a clump of pasta and waving it in front of my face before popping it into her mouth, nodding in satisfaction.

"Like I said, glutton," I re-emphasised, Sofia just humming as she ignored my comment, though she smiled as she chewed. She managed to look up from her meal as she felt Rachel approaching, her brow rising as Rachel was carrying a stack of library books in her hands, her lunch box balancing on top of the pile.

"Studying at lunch?" I asked, Rachel giving me a sheepish smile.

"I have to work on my history paper. Let's just say that... my mum wasn't too happy with my last grade," Rachel said, waving at the two of us with her fingers as she wobbled off under the weight of her books.

"Well, Rachel and Leo are out," Sofia said after swallowing, looking around the courtyard for the rest of our friends. "Did Benny make it out of the lunch line alive?"

"Probably not," I snorted, squinting my eyes through the window of the cafeteria to try and find Benny, but to no success. "What about Parker?"

"Dead," Sofia said, smirking a little as she referred to our textual conversation in the morning. I laughed as she motioned her throwing him

out of the train and a loud splat, Sofia making animated sound effects as she tried not to laugh alongside me.

"Really though?" I asked, Sofia shrugging.

"I think he said he had detention," Sofia said, before leaning in to bring her lips close to my ear. "Heard he was chatting up a girl in class, even though the teacher told him to stop talking. And you know Parker..."

"He doesn't stop talking," I finished, Sofia laughing, her breath tickling my neck. I was suddenly overly alert to how the side of her body was pressed into mine, her thigh hot against my leg.

"Exactly," Sofia said, pulling back a little to return to her food. I felt myself calm as the distance between us increased, my hand picking at the sandwich in front of me. Sofia noticed that I wasn't exactly fond of the bland bread in my hands, and nudged my in the side. I gave her a confused look as a forkful of pasta hovered in front of my face, Sofia grinning.

"Try some," Sofia said, eyes soft as she wiggled the fork a little. I feigned a gasp as I met her eyes, Sofia's lips twitching.

"You're sacrificing your precious pasta bake? For *me* ? Is the world ending?"

"Shut up and just eat it, Wes," Sofia said, pressing the fork against my closed lips, which swiftly opened. Sofia laughed as some of the sauce smeared against the corner of my mouth as I clamped down on the fork, which was pulled out from my lips moments after. Chewing quickly, finding the pasta a little too salty, I told Sofia that it was good, the girl beside me glowing as she nodded emphatically.

"Yeah, my mum makes really good pasta bake. No one does it like her!"

I bet Nico could.

I mentally flinched at my own thought, swallowing the morsel of pasta hastily, the bolus suddenly difficult to get down. As I did so, Sofia let out a

stifled laugh, her finger pointing to a spot on my face where I apparently had some sauce stuck on. I wiped at the supposed spot, but Sofia just snorted gracefully, shaking her head. As I continued to miss the spot, Sofia carefully looked around the area, before quickly leaning forward to press a chaste kiss to that part of my face. She pulled back equally as fast, licking her lips a little as she blushed up at me, eyes bright.

"Got it," Sofia said, the hint of a smile on her face as I blinked at her, surprised. Shaking myself out of my shocked stupor, I gently touched Sofia's wrist, which rested on the seat beside me. She shifted her arm to lock her fingers with mine, the smooth planes of her fingers warm. Sofia, suddenly embarrassed, dropped her head so her hair could hide her flaming face, untangling her hand from mine though she shuffled a little closer.

"Um... You're not going to give me any more of that pasta?" I asked, Sofia looking up at me for a moment as she smiled.

"Nope," she half sung, returning to her food with a giddy smile on her face. I smiled down at her, before turning back to my sandwich, my body freezing as I caught someone watching us from the doors just outside the cafeteria. Smoke wafted through the air, disappearing above the boy's head which housed a pair of hard, blue eyes.

Nico looked at me, his face neutral but eyes alight as he sucked in a breath through his cigarette before dropping it, exhaling as he stomped on the discarded butt. His tattoos rippled has his arms moved, his fingers running themselves through his dark hair which began to fall across his eyes. I caught the way his mouth pulled downwards slightly as he looked at me, making me gulp. My stomach flipped as he pulled out his phone, fingers quickly typing something before stilling. Moments after, my phone vibrated on the table in front of me, Sofia glancing over curiously. I almost yelped as I fumbled to pick it up before she could see the caller ID, quickly swiping the message window away.

"What was that?" Sofia asked, leaning on the palm of her hand as she looked at me, brow arched.

"Probably my sister," I said, mouth tight.

"Oh, she's older than you, right?" Sofia asked after closing her eyes to remember what I had told her in the past.

"Yeah," I said quickly, turning my phone onto silent and placing it face down on the table. I looked over at Nico, whose lips were now turned down into an obvious scowl as he frowned. I swallowed thickly, suddenly wondering if I was going to make it to 5th period, with the way Nico was looking at me. Pressured by his heated stare, I carefully peeled my phone off the table and quickly opened his message.

Nico - 1:02pm
Behind the pool
Now.

Nico gave me a look before turning, his feet moving towards the school's swimming pool. My body was already rising from the bench before his body became obscured by some plants, and Sofia gave me a confused look.

"Wes?" Sofia asked, and I gave her an apologetic look, quickly shoving my sandwich into my lunch bag and collecting my things from the table.

"Sorry, shit, I just remembered that I have a, uh, meeting," I said, Sofia's face not changing as she looked up at me.

"A meeting? With who?"

Nico Beckett.

"Um, M...Mr Peters," I said, my lie flowing freely. "I, uh, tried to get out of participating in House swimming and he knows it." Sofia's confused expression changed to one of amusement as she pat my arm gently.

"Well, good luck then, Wes. Hopefully he doesn't force you into the butterfly race."

"Please don't jinx me," I pleaded, Sofia laughing as I quickly ran towards the pool. As I neared the large brick building, which was empty during lunch time since no classes or training were held during the day, I looked

around for signs of Nico. He wasn't anywhere to be seen, even as I got closer to the back walls. Carefully walking around the edge of the building, I kept my eyes peeled for Nico, but the space was empty.

"Nico?" I whispered, one hand leaning against the brick wall as my other held onto my lunch bag. I was met with silence, my frown deepening as I continued along the wall. "Nico?"

My cry was caught in my throat as the door suddenly opened and a pair of strong arms pulled my through them.

"What the f-" I gasped as the arms threw me onto a pile of floaties on the floor, the hard foam jutting into my back. My words were cut short as lips pressed against me roughly, not asking for permission as they suffocated me. My hands flew upwards, only to meet a hard chest hovering above me, barely budging as I tried to push with half-hearted effort as my mind grew hazy. I let out a choked noise as fingers pulled my glasses off my face, everything going blurry except for the body right in front of me. As a tongue flickered out, my mouth opening immediately at the slick heat, I groaned as the bitter but familiar taste of cigarettes filled my mouth. Soft lips were interrupted by a slither of cool metal and I had to swallow back my moan. My hands, which had been pushing with futile effort stopped pushing and began pulling, a low moan escaping my lips as I felt Nico's lips press harder against mine, his tongue hungry as he lowered himself onto his elbows, one hand tangled in my hair.

Slow.

The word disappeared as Nico's lips attacked mine, bruising them as I struggled for breath. Pulling back, our lips separated with a loud smack, the sound making m shut eyes fly open wide, heart hammering.

"What the hell are you doing?" I breathed, releasing his shirt from my hands as I tried to wriggle from his grasp. Nico just exhaled in frustration, one of his hands gripping mine to make me stop moving beneath his larger frame. Knowing that he could overpower me even in his sleep, I began to still, but Nico didn't let go of my wrist. His hand was searing hot, the hairs on my arm standing on end as his calloused fingers made my skin itch.

"That girl," Nico said, eyes holding mine as he spoke, his voice husky and low.

"Sofia?" I asked, and Nico's eyes grew dark, his brow furrowing.

"You with her?" Nico questioned, and I bit my lip, not sure how to answer. "Then you fucked her?"

"No!" I blurted out, shaking my head as Nico just looked down at me, face tight. "I-I mean, we kissed, but I-"

"You're leading her on," Nico said, and I shook my head.

"I'm not!" I retorted, voice rising as I began to struggle again.

"So you like her?" Nico said again, his voice dangerously slow as he spoke.

"I do!" My mouth suddenly tasted bitter, and it wasn't because of Nico's lingering touch on my lips.

"You can't," Nico said, his voice as still as fact as I looked up at him, dreading the words that were about to come from his mouth. "You can't like her, because you don't even like girls."

"That's not true," I growled, body struggling against Nico's weight again, the older boy grunting as he pushed me down with his body weight. I gasped as his stomach pressed against mine despite my hands wedged between us, our legs tangling. His lips brushed across mine again, and my words became small and breathless despite myself.

"Really? Because it seems like you're enjoying this," Nico said, kissing me again, my upper lip slotting between his tightly. I let out a choked noise at his words, the knotted, fluttering feeling in my gut swelling. My mouth tingled as he kissed me, my body growing hot.

"I don't," I mumbled against Nico's mouth again, my hands slipping from between our chests. "I told you, it's not true, I-"

"It is," Nico murmured, pressing his mouth more firmly towards me before releasing. "It is." Kiss. "Say it." Kiss.

"It's not, you asshole," I groaned, Nico's mouth starting to curl against mine as my body began to cease its struggling.

"It is." Kiss. My lips moved to meet his half way with the short, pointed kiss, Nico chuckling. The small laugh rippled through me like an earthquake, my toes curling in my shoes.

"You're lying."

"I'm not," Nico replied, kissing me again. "Say it, *Wes.* "

"I won't!" I yelled, hands gripping the front of Nico's shirt as I twisted my head to the side, wrenching my mouth away from Nico's despite the needy feeling clawing up my stomach. Nico stopped moving for a moment, before slowly pulling himself off me. I blinked, confused, as Nico stood up, brushing the dust off his pants. Nico gave me a knowing smile as he looked down at me, and I balled my hands into fists as I couldn't help but think that he looked good. Shirt dishevelled, black hair mussed and lips pink and bruised, Nico definitely was a sight to see.

"You will say it, Wes. One day. Your body is already honest, but when will your tongue catch up?" Nico said, and I blushed as he just laughed, stepping outside the door. Before leaving, his hand still resting on the door frame, Nico turned his head back. "And Wes?"

" *What* ?" I asked curtly with a strained voice, scrambling up from the ground after slapping it to find my glasses. My vision restored, I looked towards Nico again, his smile satisfied and his eyes challenging.

"My place on Saturday," Nico said, lip ring moving with the words. "We have a study date."

A/N: Happy New Year everyone! I hope the new year brings you all the happiness in the world <3

FOURTEEN

The school nurse gave me a once over with knowing eyes, but signed the permission slip anyway. I thanked her and quickly left the sick bay, passing the permission of absence slip to the front desk and signing my name out for the day. After what happened in the pool storeroom with Nico, I wanted to be anywhere but on school grounds right now. Just seeing that brick building made me want to hurl my guts all over the school pavement.

Hefting my backpack onto my shoulders, I soon made my way home. The familiar building comforted me, and I smiled slightly when I saw the ageing silver sedan sitting out the front. As my keys clanged on the metal security screen at the front of my house, I heard the sound of footsteps approaching from inside the house, dropping my keys into my pocket as I waited for the person to open the door.

"Wes? What are you doing home so early?" my mum asked immediately, her tired brow creasing as she pulled me inside, pressing her hand against my forehead. "Are you sick? You don't seem to have a fever." I laughed at her worried face, giving her a hug before making my way into the kitchen, dumping my bag beside the island counter and moving to sit on one of the stools. My mum hovered around me, giving me concerned glances as she poured me a glass of juice, sliding over a packet of store-bought cookies my way.

"I'm fine, really, mum. I just felt a little sick before, but on the way home it cleared up," I lied, casting my eyes away from my mum, a little guilty for lying to her when she was so obviously concerned about me. Leanne Dillon just sighed, pulling the zip-up hoodie around her torso tight around her as she walked over to me to pat the top of my head, giving my temple a quick kiss. Looking up at her again, I found her worried expression relieved, even if only slightly.

People often said that we looked alike, and I could see why; before I bleached my hair, we shared the same light brown shade that was slightly

wavy after a good wash. I had inherited her warm brown eyes and softer facial features, though my chin was a little sharper and my lips not as plump. Otherwise, our faces were similar, though Leanne had laugh lines around the corners of her eyes and dark bags beneath them. She looked tired, though she always had a gentle smile on her face and a little glimmer in her eye.

"Look after yourself, Wes," mum said, giving my cheek a tender pinch as I sipped my juice. "I already have Jamie to worry about, I don't want to have to worry about you as well."

"You don't," I said, giving my mum a hug around her middle again, the woman laughing.

"Oh, by the way, Wes," mum suddenly said, clapping her hands together before rummaging through her handbag, which was slung on the back of one of the chairs in the kitchen. Clicking her tongue as she sorted through her belongings, she let out a tiny 'aha' as she pulled a folded brochure out, passing it to me. I gave her a questioning look, the older woman just gesturing for me to look at it, an excited smile on her face. Looking down at the small paper in my hands, I was confused since it was an advertisement for a small beach resort in Sorrento, a small town about two hours away from the city by car.

"Looks nice?" I offered, raising a brow as mum just laughed, stepping behind me to hug my shoulders, her chin resting on the top of my head. "And you're showing me this because...?"

"How do you feel about going on a little holiday over the long weekend next week? You, me, dad and Jamie. Your dad's coming back from London for the weekend," mum said, my mouth popping open. The four of us had rarely gone on holidays before, even just local trips out of town. Since dad was always on business trips, our breaks and his never really matched up so we never travelled anywhere and just stayed at home to spend time together. Mum also rarely got time off work at the hospital as well, and usually opted to work over long weekends for extra pay. The thought of being able to spend a few days out of town with my family made me smile, growing excited as I flicked through the brochure, nodding.

"It sounds really good, mum," I said, Leanne grinning.

"Good, because I already booked," she admitted, a sheepish smile on her face.

"You don't have to work?" I asked, and mum shook her head, though her face grew dark for a moment. I figured that it was just a shadow passing through the window, since her usual smile was back on her face as she plucked the brochure from my hand again, pinning it on the front of the fridge with a magnet.

"It'll be a good opportunity to get your driving hours up as well," mum said, wiggling her brow as I groaned. "Come on, Wes. You know you have to get your hours up to get your probationary licence. You're going to be 18 soon, so you better get more experience under your belt."

"Fine, fine," I sighed, looking out the window to see the family sedan in the driveway. There was a significant dent on the front bumper, and I shivered as I remembered how I had driven into our mailbox the first time I had driven. It was needless to say that I wasn't a keen driver and was more than happy to take public transport than a four-wheeled death box. I could still hear the angry shouts of drivers behind me for *not* going over the speed limit, wincing a little.

Popping a cookie between my teeth and getting up from the chair, grabbing my bag as I did so, I mumbled a thanks to mum who just hummed and lowered herself into a chair, pulling on her reading glasses. Walking upstairs to my room, I immediately emptied my books from my bag onto my desk, sighing as my biology folder tumbled out on top of the pile. Opening it, I grimaced as I pulled out the notes from my and Nico's experiment, his heavy-handed, dark scrawl strewn across the page.

We have a study date.

"For fuck's sake," I whined, slamming my head against the desk. My forehead smarted and I let out a shaky breath, eyes closing as I tried to collect my thoughts. It was silence around my, but there was still a ringing in my ears.

I really don't want to see Nico on the weekend. Not after we... kissed. Again.

I banged my head against the desk again at the memory, and could still smell the chlorine-infused dampness in the pool store room and the feeling of foam digging into my back. Behind my closed eyes I could see Nico hovering over me, his dark hair falling across his face and the glimmer of his lip ring moving in and out of my vision. I could feel his hand tugging on my hair, his mouth on mine hot and passionate. His torso elongated across mine, his thigh slipping between my own...

I yelped as my pants became tight, my penis throbbing at the memory. Eyes wide, I felt sick and sweaty and lightheaded as my eyes flew open. My chair squeaked in alarm as I flew back, my eyes staring at the bulge in my pants.

"No, no, no, no, no," I chanted, cursing myself and my body as I shook my head, trying to calm my thoughts, but the growing discomfort down there only made me focus on it harder. The tightness was so similar to when Nico had touched me before. His hands, tight around my member stroking and pumping, and his lips - oh *God*, his lips - slipping over my length, wet and warm.

"Fuck," I whimpered, disgusted at myself yet unable to stop as my hand trekked down my stomach to the waistline of my pants. Unbuttoning the grey slacks, I sighed in relief as the fabric restraining me fell away. My underwear was straining with my arousal, and I swallowed nervously as I rubbed my hand across the fabric, biting back a moan as the friction sent waves over my body. When my eyelids fluttered closed again, I could feel my hand morphing into Nico's, my smaller palm stretching and my thinner fingers growing thicker and rougher.

"Shit, this isn't... damn it," I breathed out, my free hand gripping the edge of the table as the other slipped underneath my underwear. My hand was warm, but not as warm as my dick, which throbbed at the memory of Nico's touch. Heat grew in my core as I pumped, my breathing growing erratic as I moved closer and closer to the edge, Nico's image in my mind only becoming clearer and clearer in my mind. My memory of him was so

crystalline that I swore that I could hear him calling my name in that husky tone.

Wes.

"Shit, I'm gonna..." I murmured to myself, my voice strained as I felt my stomach muscles tighten, my arms becoming rigid as my hips bucked into my hand.

"Wes."

My mother's voice behind me door made me leap up, my hardened member still pulsing and eyes terrified and wide. My fingers, slick with the beads of pre-cum that spilled from my penis, fumbled with my pant zip, not even bothering to button up. I heard the doorknob twisting, and panicked, grabbing a random sheet of paper from desk to wipe my incriminating hands with. Paper rustled and was soon shoved at the back of my desk, my body tumbling into my desk chair which rolled and rocked at the sudden weight. The tent in my pants was still obvious even sitting, and I quickly shoved a text book onto my lap just a moment before mum walked through the door, head staring at a few papers in her hand.

My back was stiff as she walked over to me, and I could feel sweat pooling on my brow. My school shirt clung to my damp back, and I gulped, willing myself to ignore the growing irritation in my pants that had been so close to release.

"So I was just searching up some of the things we can see when we go to Sorrento," mum said, not looking up from her papers. "There are some nice beaches, and we can have a barbecue on the balcony of our resort too. Maybe we can snorkel as well, that would be fun."

"Yeah, sounds good," I said quickly, mentally pinching myself at how squeaky my voice sounded. Mum finally looked up from her paper at my high-pitched, strained voice, tilting her head to the side in worry.

"Are you not feeling well again?" mum asked, reaching her hand out to press her palm against my forehead again. I bristled at the touch, and mum's

frown deepened. "You're a little warm and sweaty, Wes. I better get the thermometer to check your temperature, you may have a fever." My cheeks only grew in heat at her words and I shook my head, leaning away from her hand a little before running my hand through my hair, lugging the corners of my mouth upwards.

"I'm fine, mum. I just need a good night's rest," I assured her hurriedly, though she didn't look too convinced. "And like you said, I'm a bit sweaty after school, so I'm going to shower now."

With cold water. Very, very cold water.

"Okay, honey," mum said, stroking my cheek before leaving the room. After the door closed behind her I sunk deeper into my chair, hand over my eyes, completely mortified.

"What the hell is wrong with me," I groaned, slapping my cheeks as I tried to pull myself together for what seemed to be the millionth time in the span of a few hours. Everything was fine until Nico unravelled me again, a few kisses in a secluded store room making me descend into this madness. Letting out a self-chastising noise from the back of my throat, I pulled the piece of paper I had used to wipe my soiled hands with, my heart stopping as I saw exactly what piece of paper I had used.

My biology project results.

"Oh, just fucking kill me now," I half-sobbed, smoothing out the crinkled paper as I grimaced, my heart hammering as I saw the sticky streaks coating the paper, which grew a little transparent with the moisture. Some of the ink had smeared a little when I crinkled it with damp hands, and I swore ungracefully again. I couldn't help but notice that my pants grew a little tighter with the sight of my cum spread across Nico's writing, remembering how the same substance had looked sprayed across his bare stomach that damning night a few weeks ago.

"You're losing it, Wes," I sighed to myself, head in my hands.

But deep down, I knew that I had already lost it a few weeks ago - in Nico Beckett's sheets.

A/N: Wes is literally me when I drive - I have my licence, but I'm still not a fan of angry drivers that get antsy when I drive <u>at</u> the speed limit and not 5km/hr above it (stay legal folks lol). Also, where I'm from in Australia we can get out leaner's permit at 16, and can go for our P plates at 18, in case you were wondering :) I know it's different for other places in the world, so just a heads up!

FIFTEEN

My eyes burned as I stared at the glowing screen of my laptop, the pillows I used to prop myself up in bed slipping as I stretched my curled back. My neck popped a little as I rolled it, rubbing my tired eyes beneath my glasses. Clicking my phone's home button beside me, I squinted to make out the blurred white lines on its screen. *1:26am* . Usually fast asleep by 11, this was late for me and I was definitely feeling it. Yawning, I dropped my glasses back down over my eyes and looked at my computer again, typing the last few references of my biology assignment and saving it.

I scoffed a little as I scrolled back to the top, Nico's name sitting next to mine beneath the project's title.

"He doesn't even deserve to get his name put on this," I said, rolling my fatigued eyes before closing my laptop, my room now blanketed in complete darkness. Shoving the computer onto my bedside table, I snuggled deeper into my blanket and shoved my pillow beneath my head. Before I was overcame with sleep, I quickly unlocked my phone and sent a short, flat message to Nico.

Wesley Dillon - 1:30am
I finished our project
Not going to urs on Saturday
I'll submit it on Monday
Dont worry, ur name is on it

Tossing my phone onto my bedside table after putting it on silent, I closed my eyes. Consciousness began to ebb from my body, until there was a muted glow of white light blinking through my closed eyelids. I let out a low noise of annoyance as I rolled over, the light disappearing. I frowned in the dark, my arm tugging on the pillow as I tried to pull myself back into the lull of sleep. I failed miserably.

Frustrated, I rolled back onto my right hand side and picked my phone up with clunky fingers, almost knocking over my lamp in the process. I winced as the bright light of the phone seared my eyes, immediately turning down the brightness. The little light in the corner blinked blue, a message waiting for me behind my passcode.

Is it Nico?

The thought came to me so easily and so comfortably that I was taken aback for a brief moment. If someone asked me three weeks ago that I would be expecting a reply from Nico Beckett I would have snorted and choked. Now I just choked.

My fingers were tentative as I opened his message, my phone impossibly close to my nose as I struggled to read the small print without my glasses on.

Nico Beckett - 1:32am
Saturday's not a study date then

I blew out a forceful chestful of air in relief, though there was a small kernel in the pit of my stomach that was a little disappointed. I moved to reply, but before I could Nico had sent another message, one that sent a blow directly to my gut.

It's just a date

"The fuck! A *date* ?" I hissed to myself, cheeks red as I quickly typed a reply, my fingers moving with new found vigour as my tiredness seemed to seep from my muscles and into my mattress.

Wesley Dillon - 1:32am
Hell. No
Nope
No
No way in hell
Fuck you

Nico Beckett - 1:32am
You already did

I sputtered as I read his fast reply, and I could just hear his mocking chuckle in my head. Gritting my teeth, I pulled away the blankets around my waist, sitting up in my bed again. Reaching for my glasses, face drawn, I shoved them onto my face and smashed my fingers against my phone.

Wesley Dillon - 1:33am
Forget about it
All of it
I don't want anything to do with you
Our project is done
So leave me alone

Nico didn't reply straight away to my message, and I grew nervous. My phone screen dimmed as I stared at it, my throat dry. Tapping the screen to keep it alight, I nibbled on the peeling skin of my lower lip, the fingers of my left hand tapping against my crossed knee. I yelped as my phone suddenly vibrated in my hand, the small device slipping from my fingers and hitting corner-first against the side of my foot. I ignored the slight ache from where my phone stabbed my foot, desperate to see Nico's message.

Nico Beckett - 1:35am
I can't forget it

The simple words made me freeze. I could hear them in Nico's intonation, and I could see how his lips would move with those words. He had stated the phrase so simply, and yet it made my chest ache at how sincere the words felt.

"He can't forget it either...?" I murmured to myself, swallowing dryly as I remembered the cold shower I took and the dirtied underwear I discreetly threw into the washing machine just hours before. At a complete loss as to how to reply, I simply put my phone down with the screen up, the cool glow of the light casting shadows on the ceiling. I stared and stared at Nico's words, expecting them to disappear after I rubbed my eyes, but they didn't. They were there, clear as day in little black pixels.

"Bzzz- Bzzz- Bzzz-"

The message screen suddenly disappeared as the calling screen popped up, my phone vibrating on my sheets, the only noise being a light buzz punctuated with a surprised gasp from my mouth.

Like the message, all I could do was stare at the ringing phone, Nico's name in thick dark lettering across the screen. After letting it ring for at least a whole minute, the phone returned to black. As I sat there shellshocked, my phone lit up again with a message.

Nico Beckett - 1:43am
Really?
I know ur not asleep, Wes
Pick up the damn phone

The phone was ringing again, Nico's name slapping me in the face. Coughing to clear my throat, which felt uncomfortably tight and barren, I slid my finger across the call bar and pressed the phone to my ear. My phone felt like it was about to slip from my hand as sweat began to bead on my skin.

"Took your time," Nico chuckled, and I swallowed audibly as his voice rumbled through the receiver, impossibly close.

"What do you want, Nico?" I asked, voice hushed as to not wake up my mum in the bedroom next door. Or because my voice was shrinking inside my windpipe, it was hard to tell. Nico just chuckled, and I heard the rustling of bed sheets on his end. When I blinked, the image of Nico elongated and shirtless in his sheets made me have to lick my dry lips. Nico let out a comfortable sigh as the sound of moving fabric settled, the small, natural noise making me sink into my own bed. I rolled onto my side, phone pressed tightly between the pillow and my ear.

"A date, " Nico replied, and I let out an incredulous laugh.

"Stop messing around with me, Nico," I sighed, suddenly tired as Nico just hummed, the sound soothing in my ear. "Tell me why you keep...

associating yourself with me. And don't tell me it's because we... did that together. I've seen you with other girls before, and I know you don't stick with one for long."

"Are you jealous, Wes?" Nico said lowly, his voice a smirk in the air.

"For fuck's sa-" I started, my voice climbing before I realised, my mouth snapping shut with the clack of teeth. Letting out a sharp breath, I collected myself and spoke again. "I'm not jealous, you egotistical asshole. I just want to know why you're messing with me like this. I'm... confused, and I don't know what the fuck is going on, and it's your fault. All your fault."

It was easy to put the blame on Nico, though the admission left a bitter aftertaste on my tongue since I knew that half of the problem was me. I was scared - *terrified* - because I had never felt something like this before. This... desire for someone. And for that someone to be another guy... and worst of all, to be Nico Beckett...

I was already half submerged in the water with no way of getting back out, no matter how much I struggled.

"All my fault, is it?" Nico asked wryly, sheets crackling through the phone again. *"I seem to recall that it wasn't just me alone in my bed? I'm pretty certain that someone else was there... and quite happy to be there too. What was his name again... I think it started with 'W'..."*

"Stop talking, please," I pleaded, Nico chuckling. "I already told you that night was a mistake, okay?" After I spoke, there was silence on the other end, and I had to hold my breath to try and hear if Nico was still there on the other end as the call time continued to creep up. Straining my ears, I could hear the faint, rhythmic inhales and exhales of his breath. His breathing was interrupted as he spoke, his voice quiet yet deafening in the absolute silence of the house.

"At first I thought so too," Nico admitted, and I frowned a little. *"But I had to make sure. And that day in my house... After I cooked for you and we-"*

"Kissed," I whispered, Nico humming again, the sound lighter.

"Yeah. Nice to know you didn't forget that one, Wes."

"Shut up," I replied, though I wasn't as angry as I was before as Nico's easy laugh filtered through my phone. "After that. You said you had to make sure of something. What is that, Nico?"

"I liked it. A lot. You know that I've been with lots of girls before... but it's been a while since I felt like that. Kissing you is exciting, and before you say anything, or deny it or whatever, I know that you feel the same thing," Nico said, and I immediately opened my mouth to retort, Nico catching my sharp inhalation and shushing my through the phone, cutting me off. *"Wes. Don't lie to me. Don't lie to* yourself *."*

"I'm not ly-"

"Wes."

"Nico, I told you I'm not-"

"Wes."

"Stop saying my name like that," I said harshly, my words clipped as Nico just said my name over and over again. My name rolled off his tongue in smooth tidal waves that rolled and merged with each other to bury me.

"Wes."

"Stop it, Nico, seriously, I-"

"Wes, stop lying."

"We've already been through this at the pool, Nico!" I hissed into the phone, Nico just sighing, his voice a little exasperated with my stubbornness.

"Hey, Wes," Nico said, and I immediately began to dread his next words, but couldn't pull my ear away from the phone. All I could do was let out a small noise to let him know I was listening, the low hum cracking a little at the end.

"Hm?"

"I want to kiss you," Nico said, voice slow and deliberate as he dropped his volume to just a decibel above a whisper. I felt something cave inside me. As I pulled my legs in to my chest, left arm wrapping around them, I pulled my blanket over my head. In my cocoon, Nico's breaths were louder, and I could feel them as if he were lying right behind me. I sucked in a deep breath, lungs swelling with far too much air for the whisper I was about to release. My lips moved, the sound they emitted encased in my blankets.

"Me too."

Nico's breathing barely even hitched at my words, though he did let out a small chuckle. The two of us were silent for a few minutes more, and I just listened to Nico's even, calming breaths as my eyes began to grow heavy. Half asleep, more tired from my two-word confession than staying up well past my bedtime, I barely registered Nico's words before I fell under and he hung up the phone.

"Good night, Wes."

A/N: Okay as much as I hate people who don't contribute to group projects and make everyone else do the work, Nico is just too damn cute so I can't help but like him. Even if he'd be the worst study partner ever.

SIXTEEN

Despite going to bed so late, I woke up refreshed as the light hit my eyes. Although not groggy in the slightest, though I had a feeling my late night would catch up to me by the early afternoon, there was a sharp pain at the side of my back. Patting the bed in the sore area, my face bunched together as I pulled my phone from under my body. I sighed as I pressed the power button, only to receive a red flashing battery sign. Stretching my limbs, phone in hand, I rolled across my bed to swing my legs over the edge before plugging my phone in to charge. Rubbing my eyes before glancing over at my bedside table for my glasses, I realised that I had left them on when I fell asleep the night before.

"Shit," I grumbled, my voice a little croaky in the early morning. Looking back at my bed, my blanket discarded onto the floor sometime during the night and my pillows scattered across the bed, I found my glasses bent out of shape on the far side of the bed. "Ugh, nice one, Wes." I looked at my broken glasses in frustration, flicking the loose hinge with my finger before folding them haphazardly and placing them in a case to bring to the store to get fixed after school.

"Spare glasses, spare glasses," I chattered to myself, pursing my lips as I bend down to rummage through the drawers in my bedside table, pulling out an old case with a pair of worn glasses inside. The thick lenses and large, dark green frames made me gag a little, and I shut the case immediately and threw it back into the drawer.

Walking over to my desk, I reached into the side drawer and pulled out a box of contact lenses, opened but almost full minus one pair. I had tried wearing contacts during the summer break, but had preferred glasses over the hassle of having something on my eyeball the entire day. Unfortunately, with my regular glasses out of commission, I had to resort to using contacts, at least when I was outside.

I wouldn't be caught dead in those spare glasses.

After struggling for a good ten minutes in front of the mirror with my eyes watering, the contacts were finally in and I sighed in relief as vision returned to me. After that slight hiccup in my day, everything else in the morning went much the same as any other day; I brushed my teeth, smoothed my slightly wavy hair with water from the tap, got changed into my freshly laundered uniform and quickly ate breakfast downstairs. Mum's sedan was already gone after dinner last night, and I could see Jamie's small hatchback parked awkwardly on the sidewalk, the tail of her car sticking out while the front corner was almost embedded in a fire hydrant on the curb.

Grabbing my phone from my bedside table, still turned off and only semi-charged, I made sure I was quiet as I headed out of the house to not wake Jamie up, for she was a force to be reckoned with when woken up before midday. The walk to the train station went by quickly, and soon I was sitting on my usual bench on the platform. Finally turning my phone on, I blinked and gently pressed on my eyes as my contacts burned in the bright sunlight. Beside me, the familiar woman with pointed heels and sharp glasses gave me a curious look as my eyes watered. She looked the same as she always did, but I could tell she was wondering why I was wearing contacts. When you saw someone every day for the past few years and they looked exactly the same every time, it wasn't abnormal to wonder why a sure thing had changed.

Nico changed.

My phone finally buzzed in my hand as the screen blinked to life, revealing a few missed messages, none of which were from Nico. Disappointed, I frowned as I opened up the first few messages; one from Benny saying that he overslept his alarms (all seven of them, he emphasised) and decided to go to school, and another from Sofia. Replying to Benny's message quickly, Sofia's was not as easy to respond to. I stared at the black lettering carefully, reluctant to answer her.

Sofia - Yesterday, 3:35pm
Hey Wes, u ok?
Heard u went home early
Im worried

U seemed fine before tho?
Did u eat something off at lunch?

Sofia - Yesterday, 4:02pm
There's been a bad bug going around
U didnt catch it did u?
Want me to bring u meds?
Sorry, ur probs resting rn
I'm just worried
Message me when u can

I smiled a little at Sofia's concern, heart warming before beginning to ache with guilt. I liked Sofia, and enjoyed hanging out with her and talking with her. She was a nice person, studious and gentle, and it was easy being by her side. Her kiss wasn't bad either, but that's just it. It just *wasn't bad* . It didn't make me breathless, it didn't make me crave more, the memory of it didn't catch me off guard when I'm lying in my bed at night. It didn't make me feel the same was as Nico's kiss. I liked spending time with Sofia, but I wanted Nico. *Want* wanted him. I wondered if I just wanted Nico for his body; I was no fool, he was terribly attractive and oozed sex appeal more than any other being on the face of this earth. But as a person, he was aggravating. He annoyed me as much as he made me want to touch him.

Pinching my nose bridge as I closed my eyes, I exhaled loudly before replying. I didn't want to hurt Sofia, and I knew that I should just be honest with her and stop leading her on. I knew it... but I was scared. I could see her large brown eyes looking at me with despair, and it just made me feel sick. My fingers typed and then backspaced a few times, before I just committed myself to my words and pressed send.

Wes - 7:58am
Hey Sof, sorry
I wasnt feeling good yesterday so I went home and slept it off
Im feeling better now
I think
Thanks tho

Sofia's response was rapid, the three typing dots appearing on my screen before I even sent my last message.

Sofia - 7:58am
So ur alive!
I was starting to think u died lol
Glad to hear ur feeling better tho
U coming to school?
Parker's saved a seat for u on the train
Some sweaty guy is eyeing it tho

I laughed a little at the animated image Sofia attached to her message, the lady beside me giving me another questioning look.

Wes - 7:59am
Tell him to defend it with his life
I'll see u on the train

Sofia - 7:59am
At least Parker's useful for something

Snorting at Sofia's light jab at our friend, I tucked my phone into my pocket as I heard the train approaching. As the carriages slowed in front of me, I spotted Sofia waving from me through the window and returned it with a small one of my own before stepping through the doors. Pushing through the people standing, apologising under my breath, I plopped myself down on the chair after Parker hastily removed leg from its surface. I smothered the small smile on my lips as I saw a bald man with dark sweat stains beneath his pits and on his back frown and scuttle off to the other side of the carriage.

"Morning, Wes," Parker said, yawning a little as he leaned his head against the train window.

"Late night?" I asked, Parker humming as he closed his eyes with fatigue, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Night, Parker," Sofia snorted, before turning to me. Sofia gave me a small, secret smile as she shuffled a little closer to rest her head on my shoulder. I sucked in a breath as her hair tickled my jaw, one of her hands resting itself on my forearm. Slowly, her fingers crept forward, until they intertwined themselves in my own. I wanted to pull my hand away, but couldn't bring myself to do it. I could feel my hands become clammy, though if Sofia noticed she didn't mention it. All she did was smile as she snuggled into my side, her soft cheek warm on my shoulder.

"You look good in contacts," Sofia said softly, her jaw moving against my body. All I could do was offer her a quiet thanks after commenting about how my eyes are burning, Sofia laughing before silence took us again.

The two of us sat like that for the rest of the train ride until we reached our stop. Finally able to untangle myself from Sofia without arousing her suspicions for an ulterior motive, I kicked Parker in the shin to wake him up before stepping off the train. Sofia stuck close to my side, her hand swinging by her hip. I could feel her arm extending towards mine, but as her fingers brushed the back of my hand I quickly shifted my backpack straps, gripping them with my hands. Sofia's dropped away, though she didn't notice anything amiss, and skipped happily beside me. I swallowed my guilt and cursed myself.

"I'll see you at lunch then, yeah?" Sofia said, turning to me as we reached the point of the hallway where our lockers diverged. I nodded, Sofia giving me a soft smile with a hint of blushed cheeks, before turning away. As I walked to my locker, I was surprised to see Nico walking through the halls, cigarette hanging from his lips and a girl dangling on his arm. I scoffed at the sight of his dishevelled uniform and slick lips, and the way the girl's hair had obviously been tugged and lipstick smeared in whatever extracurriculars they had before classes. The girl tugged on Nico's arm, his head soon lowering as he kissed her needy lips quickly, his eyes rolling slightly.

I want to kiss you.

"Fucking liar, you want to kiss everyone," I said bitterly under my breath, Nico's words from last night growing sour. As if sensing my pointed gaze,

Nico's head turned and his blue eyes met mine. I felt winded when his eyes, which had seemed steely and bored just a moment ago soften, his lips curling as he shrugged his shoulder harshly, causing the girl to lose her grip on his sleeve. It did not take long for her talons to latch onto his arm again, Nico looking away from me in annoyance as I narrowed my eyes, grabbing my books roughly just as the bell rang.

I waited for a few moments as the crowds dispersed, and by the time I turned back from my locker, Nico and the girl were gone from sight.

"Probably went to some store room to continue whatever they started," I grumbled, clutching my books tight against my chest as I made my way to the classroom. As I rounded the corner, a pair of strong hands sunk into the front of my shirt and pulled me into darkness. The books in my hands tumbled to the ground in a heap as the hands pinched my skin. My heart flew to my mouth as I let out a surprised yelp as my back hit something hard, but the sound was smothered by a pair of soft lips. They tasted a little like lipstick, but after a moment it changed to tobacco and coffee. My muscles, tensed from fear, relaxed as the familiar taste made me melt. Arms snaked around my waist, pulling me away from the shelf that jutted into my back and against a smooth, solid chest.

Teeth tugged at my lower lip and I groaned as his tongue slipped through the opening the sound created, Nico chuckling a little. Just as I was beginning to lose my breath completely, Nico pulled our lips apart with a pop and rested his forehead against mine. My hands that were splayed across his chest could feel the deep rising and falling of his breaths, which were as laboured as mine. Nico gently squeezed my waist tightly, his nose bumping with mine.

"I've wanted to do that since last night," Nico murmured, making me roll my eyes.

"Clearly that didn't apply to just me," I said, voice blunt as I pushed on his chest, creating some space between our chests. "You had some of her lipstick on your mouth, by the way. Almost tastes as gross as your cigarettes."

"I didn't *want* to kiss her, it just happened," Nico said slowly, his hands finding my hips again. In the dark, I could feel him lean down to speak in my ear. "But I wanted to kiss *you* ."

"Didn't seem like that from what I saw," I replied, squinting to try and see Nico's face in the dark, but could only catch the gleam of his eyes as they looked down at me. "I'm not convinced." After a moment's pause, Nico's thumb and forefinger found themselves on my chin, tilting my head up. I saw the glimmer of his teeth through his smirk as he leaned down to kiss me again, slow and sensual. As his lips moved, I couldn't help but match him, leaning into the touch. Nico smiled when he pulled back, his thumb running over my glossy bottom lip.

"Convinced now?" Nico asked, voice a little husky as he lowered his volume. Outside, the final warning bell chimed.

I didn't answer him as I bent down to gather my books that had spilled across the floor, holding them against my chest as I opened the door of the storage closet, light flooding the small space. With the light, I could see Nico's face clearly, and he was looking at me expectantly, waiting for an answer. His eyes didn't waver as they looked into mine, making the corners of my mouth quirk up.

"Hmm... You're getting there," I said, Nico's rumbling laugh cutting off as I closed the closet door behind me.

I have a skeleton shaped like Nico Beckett in my closet. Fan-fucking-tastic.

A/N: School just started back up for me so writing new chapters is going to be a bit hard (school is stressful sighhh) but I have some pre-written chapters here so it'll still be weekly updates! When I run out of chapters, however, updates may not be as frequent, though my goal is to be able to release a chapter a week - I'll try my hardest! Thanks for reading :)

SEVENTEEN

It was now Friday, and everyone has noticed that Nico was attending school far more often than before. Sure, he sometimes turned up late, or left in the middle of the day for smokes, but he was always back by lunchtime, only to disappear somewhere on campus. It had also become some sort of appointment for me to leave my friends at the end of lunch to head to the pool storeroom under the guise of needing to meet with teachers about school work. People hadn't put two and two together, and frankly, I didn't expect them to; Nico and I were never in the same thought bubble, since we were two very different people with very different reputations. But, somehow, it always ended up being the two of us in the back storeroom surrounded by the smell of chlorine and the feeling of foam kickboards under our backs.

I frowned as Nico lit a cigarette above my face, inhaling deeply before exhaling a plume of swirling grey. I let out a slight noise of disgust from my breath, Nico just snickering in response and blowing a waft down towards my face. Nico was sitting with his back against the brick wall of the storeroom, his legs laid out flat as my head rested comfortably on his thighs. Though not the softest things in the word, his legs were comfortable enough and I didn't want to move, even if he was blowing that putrid smoke into my face.

"If you want to get cancer go ahead, but I'm good without it, thanks," I said, scrunching my nose as Nico just looked down at me in amusement. My fingers twitched as I had to push back the urge to reach up and run my fingers through his dark hair, which hung over his eyes as he bent his neck to face me. After looking at my crinkled nose for a second longer, Nico sighed and crushed the cigarette against the stone ground, orange embers dying as the lit end was snuffed out.

"Happy now?" Nico asked, rolling his eyes a little, though his mouth was smiling as I nodded, humming.

"Much happier. Those things taste like shit, I don't even know why you smoke them," I said, Nico laughing.

"It's something that keeps my hands busy. And you get used to the taste," Nico said, eyes alight as he leaned down, kissing me. My eyes fluttered closed as I relished in the feeling of his mouth on mine, not really minding the slight taste of tobacco which had, unfortunately, become something I was growing used to.

"I guess you really do," I murmured against Nico's mouth, the boy grinning as he pulled back, a little triumphant. Letting my hand move upwards, I slapped Nico's hand as he began to reach for another cigarette. "Nope. This is a cancer free zone, asshole. Keep your hands busy another way."

"Like this?" Nico said, linking his fingers with mine in the air. I stared at our intertwined hands and felt my stomach flip as his rough thumb drew a circle on the back of my hand slowly.

"It's an improvement," I replied flippantly, Nico letting out a snort as he lowered our hands onto my stomach, still clasped together tightly. I found my eyes closing against as Nico's free hand started to fiddle with my hair, his fingers raking through the locks lazily as he found another way to keep his fingers busy. Better than smoking, I guess, even if it made my toes curl every time his nails would tickle my scalp.

It felt like an eternity until either of us spoke again, both of us just basking in the comfortable silence and feeling of our hands on each other, even if the touches were (mostly) innocent. Feeling his warmth on my stomach and cradling my head was comforting, and comforting wasn't usually something that accompanied Nico. Something about the ease of being by his side stirred something inside me, but I didn't want to figure out what that was and just crushed the feeling down like the butt of his cigarette.

Nico was the one to break the silence, his fingers stroking my hair stilling as he spoke.

"That girl you're always with," Nico said, my eyes opening as he paused. I swallowed, turning my body and head to the side to avoid his gaze, though I

couldn't being myself to lift my head off his thigh. Nico's hand in my hair pulled away as I moved, but reattached itself as I stilled again.

"What about her?" I asked, my words a little too fast and voice a little too high. Nico just let out a knowing scoff.

"What is she to you?"

"She's..." I started, trying to find the right words to describe it, but faltering. My mind fell back to our kiss and Sofia's touches that were more than just friendly. I also thought about those touches and how I would shy away from them. Nico's hand on my head suddenly felt heavy as I coughed a little to clear my clogged throat.

"She's a good friend. It's... kind of complicated," I managed to get out.

"You're leading her on," Nico said simply, and I tensed, Nico's fingers stopping for a brief second before continuing to comb through my locks.

"I'm n... ugh, it's complicated, okay? I'm... trying to work things out," I said, turning my head down a little to bury my face in Nico's pants.

"If you're not into her, just tell her," Nico said, and I frowned, rolling over onto my back to look at him again.

"I *am* into her," I said, Nico just giving me an incredulous look, my words seemingly more pathetic on my tongue than I thought they would. "It's just... anyway, you're not one to talk. It's not as if you're leading all of those girls of yours on or anything." I gave Nico a challenging look as he just chuckled, his hand leaving my head to run his fingers through his own hair, pulling it back from his eyes.

"What I'm doing is different," Nico said, and I scoffed.

"Riiiight," I drawled, rolling my eyes. "Enlighten me, Nico, because I honestly can't tell the difference."

"I make it clear with them that I'm not in this for the long haul," Nico said, smirking a little. "They know that it's just a bit of fun, and nothing more.

They know it's just sex. I don't think that your pretty little girlfriend quite understands where she stands."

They know it's just sex.

Those words struck a nerve in me, and I sat up quickly, dropping Nico's hand from mine. It was all suddenly very clear to me. It was something that I had always known deep down, but was too afraid to acknowledge it. But Nico had just laid it all out in front of me with a neat little bow. Sex. That was all I was to Nico Beckett, just a good romp that was a little exciting and new for the time being. Nico was interested now, the novelty of sleeping with a boy still fresh. But what about later? What would change in a month? A week? Even tomorrow?

What am I to Nico Beckett?

I wasn't conceited enough to think that I was anything more than just another one of his flings. No matter how much he stroked my hair or how comfortable it was to rest my head on his lap, like he said, I was quite aware of where I stood. The only thing that separated me from those girls was that I had a dick and they didn't. It was probably the only thing that even made Nico look my way. My throat felt tight as I looked down at the ground.

Plastering a stiff smile on my face, I picked at one of the foam kickboards under my foot, my nail digging into the bright red material.

"I guess I can kind of see the difference," I said, not looking up at Nico. "I mean, I know where *I* stand."

I felt Nico's head snap towards me, looking up at him to see that his brow was raised.

"What are you saying, Wes?" Nico asked, and I shrugged, brushing off a layer of foam shavings from my crossed legs.

"Nothing, don't worry about it," I said, getting up to stand as I checked the time on my watch. Lunch was about to end, and I didn't want to be late to

my next class. "Anyway, lunch is over. I'll see you later."

"Wait, Wes," Nico said, getting up and stepping towards me. I sucked in a breath as Nico grabbed my wrist, pulling me to face him.

"What, Nico?" I said impatiently, my voice a little biting as the bell rang in the distance.

"I'll see you tomorrow, right?" Nico asked, and I blinked. His eyes were serious as he spoke, his fingers tightening around my arm. "My place."

A date.

"Yeah," I said softly, tugging my arm out of his grip as I gave him a small nod. "Tomorrow."

A date. Just sex. Know where you stand.

Which was it?

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"Where are you going?" Jamie's voice asked from the top of the stairs. Her words were slurred and sloppy, and were swiftly followed by a large yawn. Jamie's thick hair was wound in a messy knot on the top of her head with tufts sticking out in unruly spicules from the bun, and she rubbed her stomach sleepily through her worn T-shirt. When she finally gained some sort of consciousness and looked at me properly, she gave me a questioning look. "Jesus, the question is more like *who* are you going to?"

"You must still be sleeping, you're being ridiculous," I said, rolling my eyes as Jamie descended the stairs. My sister shook her head as she yawned again.

"Nuh uh, I am very much conscious little bro," Jamie said, pulling at the hem of my shirt. "Conscious enough to see that you, you know, did your hair. Like, it's not a fucking mop right now. And oh my god, are you wearing cologne?" Jamie almost squealed as she took in a deep breath,
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waving her hand in the air to force the aroma up her nostrils. "Oh shit you are! Who's the unlucky girl?"

"Fuck off, I'm not meeting a girl , " I said flatly as my cheeks flushed at her teasing, giving Jamie a withering look as I pulled on my shoes. Slinging my bag onto my back, I ignored Jamie's cat calls and made my way out of the house towards Nico's. My feet knew where to go without having to think about it too much, and I self-consciously sniffed at my pulse points where I had spritzed a little perfume this morning. I hadn't really noticed it until Jamie had pointed out, but I had made an effort.

I made a fucking effort to see Nico. Nico. Fucking. Beckett.

"What are you doing, Wesley?" I scolded myself, rubbing my wrists on my pants to try and lessen the scent that clung to my skin there. As I saw Nico's colourful house pull into view, I suddenly grew nervous. My fingers wrung together as I walked up the steps, the smell of freshly cut flowers invading my nostrils. Steeling my nerves, I knocked on the door. Dropping my hand to my side, fist still clenched, I tapped my feet as I waited for Nico to open the door. When it did, I was surprised that it wasn't Nico standing there, but a short, elderly woman instead. She had long grey hair that was pulled back in a three-strand plait down her back and secured with a blue ribbon. Her skin was tanned and wrinkled, with freckles scattered across the surface amongst the folds. Laugh lines creased at the corner of her eyes, which shone in a brilliant blue hue, the spitting image of Nico's.

"Yes?" the woman asked, face curious as she looked me once over. Clearing my throat, I plastered a small, stiff smile on my face.

"Hi, I'm Wesley Dillon. Um, Nico invited me over?" I cursed myself a little as my voice squeaked a little at the end, rising up in a question. The woman blinked for a moment, before she smiled widely, stepping back to open the door wider.

"Nicolas invited you? Well then, I guess you'd better come in," the woman said, laughing as if her words were some inside joke that I didn't quite get, a small gleam in her eye. "Now dear, I'm Belinda, Nicolas's grandmother. But you can just call me Bell."

"Um, nice to meet you, Bell," I said, the woman laughing again, the sound airy and light.

"Well, Nicolas is upstairs. I'm afraid he's still sleeping. Oh, I'll have to scold him for not greeting his guests properly," Bell sighed, and I shook my head hastily.

"Oh, no, um, I'm early," I said, and Bell just gave me a smile that said that she did not believe me, but was going to just let it go.

"Do you know where his room is?" Bell asked, and I blanched a little as I nodded. "Feel free to wake him up dear. Might take a while though. Cold water to the head seems to work wonders though, by the way."

I laughed a little at the slightly mischievous gleam in the older woman's eye and the small smirk she gave. Looking at her now, she and Nico really did look very similar. Nico must have taken a lot after Bell's side of the family, it seems.

"I'll keep that in mind," I replied, Bell nodding as she pat my shoulder, urging me up the stairs. Quietly creeping into Nico's room, which was still plunged in darkness with the shades drawn, I dumped my bag onto the ground. The thump it made barely caused Nico to stir, the tall boy just rolling over onto his back, his mouth parted as he breathed in and out peacefully. I carefully stepped across discarded clothes to stand at the edge of his bed, trying not to ogle too much at his blanket which hung low around his waist, revealing his naked torso.

Damn him for being so good looking.

Sighing, I crawled onto the edge of the bed on my knees, the mattress dipping with the weight. Nico stirred a little, though his eyes didn't open.

"Hey, Nico, wake up," I coaxed, shaking his shoulder. Nico groaned, pushing my hand away as he grumbled. Growing a little irritated, I shook his shoulder again, firmer and faster than before. I saw Nico's brow crease as his mouth turned down, his hand moving to push mine away again. "Nico, get the hell up," I pushed again, voice impatient as I continued to

shake his shoulder. As if something suddenly registered in his sleep-hazed mind, Nico's eyes opened and his head turned towards me, eyelids flickering. His disgruntled frown was suddenly replaced with a grin as he grabbed both of my arms and pulled me down with his overwhelming strength. I grunted as my body hit the mattress, Nico's body rolling over mine as his arms pinned my own down. I gulped as he kicked a leg over mine to trap me between his thighs.

"Morning," Nico said, voice gravelly with sleep, the roughness making me shiver.

"It's almost not morning, you know," I said, Nico laughing as I wiggled the watch on my wrist, my movement restricted because of the weight of his hand.

"How'd you get in? Spare key again?" Nico asked, and I shook my head.

"Bell," I replied, and Nico nodded, his smile gentle. "She's nice."

"She is," Nico replied, leaning his face down to give me a brief kiss. I reciprocated the touch, Nico pulling back, his smile a little broader.

"Why are you smiling at me like that?" I asked, frowning. Nico just laughed, removing his hands from my arms as he sat up, still straddling me. I managed to seat myself up so my back leaned against the headboard, Nico's weight brushing my calves.

"Because you're honest today," Nico said, and my mouth popped open as I blushed. Nico didn't avoid my arms as I shoved his chest, sending him falling onto his back at the end of the bed.

EIGHTEEN

"Nicolas, if you have a friend coming over you can't just stay in bed," Bell scolded as Nico and I walked into the kitchen. Bell gave me an apologetic look, before turning back to Nico with a frown. "And aren't you going to offer him something to drink? He'll think you were raised by a cretin or something."

"Yeah, yeah," Nico said, giving his grandma a kiss on the top of her head as she let out a breath, murmuring something under her breath, though her mouth quirked as Nico pulled her into a hug. I could only watch with curiosity as Nico released his grandma, something about the way he carried himself different from his usual self. He seemed... relaxed. Open. Warm.

It was nice.

"Don't 'yeah, yeah' me, mister," Bell said, hitting his side as she turned to me. "And Wesley, dear, it was lovely meeting you but I'm running late for my pottery class. Do come again another day, I would love to chat with you properly. *Over refreshments* ." Bell's last words were stressed as she gave Nico a look, the boy snorting as I covered my laugh with my hand. Bell soon left, leaving me and Nico in the kitchen once again. I ran my finger over the stone surface of the kitchen island, remembering how just a few weeks ago Nico and I had sat here, in a situation far different from the one we were in now. What had felt like an unfamiliar, daunting space had changed at some point, though I couldn't exactly pinpoint when.

"So, you're not going to offer me something to drink, *Nicolas* ?" I asked, smirking a little as Nico just shook his head, an amused smile on his face.

"We're going to head out in a second anyway," Nico said, and I tilted my head to the side, confused. "What? You thought we were just going to lounge around here all day?"

"Honestly? Yeah, kind of," I admitted, rubbing the back of my neck awkwardly.

"If you want to just stay in, I don't mind. I can think of... plenty of *things* we could do here," Nico said, smirk deepening as his eyes looked me up and down once, the movement of his vibrant eyes saying everything his lips hinted at. My ears grew hot as I shook my head, already hoisting my backpack over my shoulders.

"Nope, let's go out," I said hurriedly, Nico laughing as he opened the fridge. He rummaged around for a few moments, before pulling out a few pre-prepared containers and a bottle of iced tea. "What's that for?"

"Food, to eat," Nico replied simply, leaning back to look at me from behind the open refrigerator door. "Behind you in the bottom cupboard should be a picnic basket. Grab it for me?"

Listening to Nico, I searched around the cupboards until I found a bright green picnic basket.

"This one?" I asked, Nico nodding.

"Yeah, just put it on the counter there." It took Nico a few minutes to load everything that he wanted to into the basket, closing the latch on the top when he was done. Picking up the basket and grabbing his car keys from the tray on the counter, Nico jerked his head towards the door as he walked past.

"Where are we going?" I asked as Nico loaded up the basket into the backseat of his car. Sliding into the passenger seat, Nico just gave me a secretive smile as he pulled out of the driveway. "Seriously, Nico. You're not going to take me into the forest or something, fatten me up and then kill me, right?"

"Fatten, yes. Kill, maybe," Nico replied teasingly, making me roll my eyes. After a moment's silence, he spoke again. "We're going to a place with a really nice view of the city. Calm down, Wes."

"Good, I'm too young to die," I said, trying to hide the grin that tugged at my lips. Nico laughed, the sound rough but light, his eyes crinkling and his lip ring shaking. The rest of the car ride was uneventful, Nico rolling down the window to get a wash of the cool breeze that burst through. The suburban landscape slowly began to bleed away into concrete buildings spotted with colourful graffiti, the sidewalk becoming more barren and the building more decrepit. I gulped as the midday sun was obscured behind the grey buildings, and hastily rolled up the window on my side.

Nico let out an amused sound from his throat, glancing over to me as he began to slow the car, the vehicle veering to the left.

"Uh... Nico," I said nervously, throat dry as Nico pulled his car into an abandoned underground parking lot. The overhead lights were cracked and off, and there was broken glass littering the concrete ground like fallen stars. There were a few rusted shopping carts pushed to the sides, and the whole thing looked like a horror movie waiting to happen.

"Hm?" Nico replied, seemingly entertained by how my voice cracked a little at the end as I peered out of the window, my hands fiddling with the worn strap of my seatbelt.

"We're not... staying here, right?" I asked, turning to Nico with pleading eyes, the dark-haired boy just snorting, the car stopping as he pulled on his handbrake pointedly. "Oh God. You're actually going to kill me."

"I did say 'maybe'," Nico snorted, leaning over the centre console to stare at me. One of his hands rested on the seat next to my thigh, the other reaching across to the other side to press against the door handle, trapping me between his arms. My heart clapped wildly as I braced myself against the car seat, the metal holdings at the bast squeaking a little as I pushed backwards, though the backrest did not give. Nico smirked, and the movement of his lips made me look down at them, my stomach twisting.

Click.

Nico pulled back then, the door beside me swinging open. I blinked, body frozen as Nico got out of the car and opened up his boot, pulling out our

picnic basket with a lazed gait to his walk. Wearing a dark T-shirt and even darker jeans, which wrapped around his long, muscular legs tightly, Nico seemed to blend into the darkness of the carpark, the day's sunlight unable to break through the thick concrete. A few slithers of light made it through the cracks, lighting up Nico's blue eyes as he walked over to me.

"Coming?" Nico asked, and I nervously looked around at our sketchy surroundings, biting my lip.

"I'm not going to get tetanus or anything, right?" I asked, half joking, half serious. Nico just rolled his eyes as he grinned, grabbing my upper arm and hoisting me out of the car. I felt a little jolt of adrenaline rush through my as his fingers pressed into my flesh; not harsh enough to make me wince, but heavy enough to make me acutely aware of where and how he was touching me.

"Just follow me," Nico said, dropping his had from my arm, only to grab my wrist. My hand dangled limply as I followed him, glancing backwards at the eerily quiet concrete behind me, expecting someone to jump out from behind a pillar and try to mug us. Part of me found comfort with Nico beside me, his warmth flowing into my arm. It felt a little... safe.

Safe.

I physically choked as the thought popped into my mind, Nico looking down with an arched brow. I just shook my head without meeting his gaze as we headed through the door of an exit stairwell. A padlock and chain had been tethered to the handle, but the mechanism looked to have been cut, and dangled pathetically from the door. The chain clinked against itself as Nico opened the door, ushering me through.

"Up," Nico said simply, and I nodded, stepping ahead of him. Nico let go of my wrist as we ascended the stairs, though I could feel his presence hovering close to my back. I felt my tensed muscles begin to melt, and by the time we reached the top of the spiralling set of stairs, I felt comfortable enough in my safety to push open the door myself. Rusted hinges groaned as I open it fully, stepping through. Wind immediately hit my face, and light burst through, making me cover my eyes as I blinked.

When my eyes finally adjusted to the sudden light, I let out a surprised gasp.

The sun flew high in the sky, and sparse white clouds lazily drifted across the expansive blueness. Everything looked different from higher up, and as I stood there on the roof of the abandoned building, I could see *everything.* I could see past the decaying buildings and obscene graffiti smattering their walls. I could see the suburbs, their terracotta tiles and the trees in people's backyards, though from far away they were blurred brush strokes of greens and yellows. I could see the distant skyscrapers of the city centre, the ferris wheel rotating its spindles, and the river winding through it all. The only sounds I could hear was the wind blowing gently against the walls, and the rustle of Nico's picnic basket as he stepped to stand beside me. Everything was awash with colour beyond the grey, and it was beautiful.

"Not bad, right?" Nico said, and I nodded, still in awe of the view. I only looked away from it when I felt Nico's hand slip into mine, his fingers tugging softly. Looking at him curiously, I didn't question him when he pulled me up a short ladder onto the tallest point of the building. Laying out a well-worn blanket, Nico flopped down, pulling on my arm to join him. Once we were both seated, Nico pulled out the contents of the lunch he had packed us; a variety of sandwiches, cut fruit, cheese and crackers, muffins, juice and a few beers.

"You made these?" I asked, gesturing to the sandwiches, and Nico nodded. I almost snorted at the image of Nico cutting up vegetables and spreading butter on bread that invaded my mind, Nico obviously picking up on the hilarity I found in it, rolling his eyes.

"I made the sandwiches, my grandma made the muffins. The other stuff was just bought," Nico said, pointing to the spread before us.

"And you prepared this? Last night?" I asked, remembering how everything seemed to be ready and waiting in the fridge before I came over. Nico just nodded, and I had to shake my head and rub my eyes as his cheeks turned a slight tinge of pink. "Oh my fucking god, are you *blushing* ?" My voice was as incredulous as my eyes, my hands flying up to pinch Nico's cheeks. Nico growled, his hands grabbing my own and pulling them roughly off his face.

I yelped as his weight was suddenly pushing against my weaker arms, my back hitting the blanket. Though soft, it didn't provide much cushioning against the hard concrete, which was a little warm after baking in the early afternoon sun. Nico's figure blotted out the sun from my eyes, and I just stared up at him, a smile on my face as Nico frowned down at me.

"I wasn't blushing," Nico said, his voice steady as I just hummed in response.

"Mhmm."

"I wasn't."

"Mmmmhmmm," I said, drawing out my words as my smile widened, Nico's eyes flashing.

"I wasn't," Nico pressed again, his head lowering a little as he released my hands from his, resting his elbows on either side of my face.

"Mmmmmmhmmm- mmph!"

My teasing hum was interrupted by Nico's lips smothering my mouth, his hand moving to comb through my hair. I let out a content sigh as I was sandwiched between the warmth of the heated concrete and Nico's body. I had to swallow back a whine as Nico pulled back, his lips a little glossy. Nico searched my face for a moment, before his own relaxed into his usual smug smirk.

"You're blushing now," Nico said, his finger flicking my heated cheek. My face scrunched as I forcefully pushed on Nico's chest, managing to slip out from beneath him with a huff.

"I'm not!" I yelled, covering my face with my hands as I crawled to the other corner of the blanket.

"Honest as always, Wes," Nico chuckled, making me curse under my breath. Snatching up one of the sandwiches, I irritatedly took a large bite

out of it. I only grew more annoyed when I realised that the sandwiches were really quite delicious, the fillings melting in my mouth.

Damn him.

"Good?" Nico asked, moving to sit beside me. I shook my head adamantly, frowning as I took another bite. And another. And another, until the sandwich had disappeared from my hands.

"They're terrible," I lied, holding my hand out in front of me. Nico just laughed, reaching across the blanket to grab another sandwich, pressing it into my waiting hand. I didn't thank him as I took another bite, ignoring the way he casually nestled his arm around my waist with one hand, popping open the cap of a beer with the other. After taking a swig of his beer and hearing me swallow the last bite of my second sandwich, my mouth already craving more, Nico thrust the beer can in front of my face.

"Want some?" he asked, and I shook my head, finally turning to him properly.

"Are you trying to make me drunk so you can get into my pants again?" I asked, exhaling through my nostrils hotly.

"I don't think I need to get you drunk to do that," Nico replied, fingers pinching my side as I almost regurgitated the sandwiches bobbing in my stomach.

"You're so full of shit," I fumed, getting up and out of his one-armed embrace. Nico just shook his head at my reaction before taking a relaxed mouthful of beer, watching me from the ground. Taking a moment to calm myself, I grabbed another one of the sandwiches and walked back over to Nico. Standing over him, I kept a neutral expression on my face before sitting down beside him again, our shoulders bumping. I could see the corners of Nico's lips quirk from my periphery, taking a bite of my sandwich as his hand relocated itself to its comfortable nook at my waist. His muscles contracted, pulling me closer into his side. Without consciously doing so, I leaned into his touch, my head falling to rest on his shoulder. Feeling Nico inhale as he was about to speak, I pinched his thigh.

"Don't even say it," I grumbled, Nico just chuckling, my cheeks red as I could feel his eyes on me.

He smelled like beer and musk and nicotine. Just like that night.

NINETEEN

Sofia had texted me early in the morning, though I slept through the notification after a long night with Nico. Not that we *did* anything; after having lunch and lazing around in the sun on the rooftop, enjoying the gentle breeze and the view, Nico had driven me home a few hours after and headed off. It wasn't until the early hours of the morning that Nico had woken me with a call, and it wasn't until an hour later that we stopped talking and I was allowed to drift of into sleep.

Now well into the afternoon on a Sunday, I was groggily lying in bed flicking through my phone, dread seeping through the safety of my blanket as I looked at Sofia's message.

Sofia - 9:14am
Hey Wes!
Do u wanna come over to my place later?
I'm home all day

There was a lull in the messages until 10am, where she again asked me if I wanted to come over. I gulped, scrolling down the line of messages she had sent me, the last one with a note of concern that I hadn't replied to any of her messages. I rubbed my eyes with my phone held close to my nose, the lettering blurry without my glasses. My fingers tapped on my glass screen, the words coming easier through my fingers than my mouth.

Wes - 3:30pm
Yeah sounds good
Sorry I was asleep
Late night

I rolled over in my bed as I saw three dots at the bottom of the chat and a green circle around Sofia's picture. As I looked at the miniature overtly candid shot of her, her dark hair loose around her face and her eyes closed so her long lashes left a shadow on the smooth skin there, I could picture

the way those features would fall if she knew that I didn't see her in *that* way.

The way she clearly saw me.

My phone vibrated in my hand as she replied with speed that put every millennial to shame.

Sofia - 3:30pm
Studying all night?
I have coffee and food :)

I managed a little smile at her words, the imagined visage of Sofia waiting for me at her house with a steaming mug of instant coffee in her slender hands not an unwelcome one, though not the one I found myself imagining at all unsavoury times of the day.

Sofia - 3:31pm
Do u wanna come over now?

No.

Wes - 3:32pm
Sure
See u in a few

Turning my phone off, I rolled onto my stomach and buried my head into my pillow, groaning.

"You need to stop this, Wesley," I scolded myself, words muffled by the fabric and feathers. Laying limply in my bed for a few minutes longer, I finally gathered what little courage I had left and managed to roll myself out of my blankets and sheets. I got changed quickly, grabbing the outfit I wore the day before from the back of a chair without a second thought. It didn't take me too long to stick my contacts onto my eyeballs and muss my hair, which was in mild disarray atop my head. I picked at the ends of a few clumped locks of hair, grimacing as I noticed how much my natural roots had grown out. What had once been a professionally styled warm blonde

had turned almost brassy, and my dark brown roots were stark against the brightness.

I really had to get my hair done again.

As I leaned into the mirror to get a closer look at my root situation, the door to the shared bathroom was flung open, Jamie barging in.

"Gotta pee," Jamie announced, stepping through the inner door that hid the toilet, closing it behind her. I sighed as I heard Jamie curse, the toilet seat apparently still being up and almost swallowing her ass whole.

"You're the only guy in this household, Wes. Can you put the damn seat down when you've finished pissing? Jesus," Jamie whined, her voice not able to be dulled by the thick door.

"Sor-ry," I replied sarcastically, giving up on trying to salvage my tragic hair situation just as Jamie walked out. My sister, still clad in her terrible pyjamas and her hair half fallen out of her bun, pushed my aside by her hip as she washed her hands. Looking at me in the mirror's reflection, Jamie raised a thick brow.

"You really need to fix your hair, it looks like a muppet died on your head," Jamie said, flashing her teeth as she grinned.

"I know, you don't need to tell me," I grumbled, not even going to deny the fact that my appearance looked less than stellar.

"Why don't you go back to our natural colour? I don't even know why you wanted to blonde in the first place," Jamie said, clicking her tongue. "And mum said you wouldn't look good blonde anyway, yet you still did it."

"Yeah, yeah, I get it, I know *now* that I don't look good blonde," I said, giving my sister a pointed look. "I'll probably dye it back soon, I just have to buy some dye."

"I can buy you some after work? I'll even try to help you fix... whatever *that* is," Jamie said, crinkling her nose as she waved her dripping hands towards

my face. Ducking away from her soapy grasp, I thanked her before heading back to my room to grab some of my things. Stuffing my phone into my back pocket and my wallet into the other, I made my way downstairs. Jamie had relocated into the kitchen, where she was chugging on a carton of orange juice as she leaned on the counter. Waving her goodbye, receiving one in return, I made my way to Sofia's house.

What should have been a short-ish walk turned into a half hour-long trek. My feet felt sluggish, and I found myself taking the long way around the park instead of cutting through it like I usually would. My feet knew that Sofia's house was not where they wanted to take me, and it took me all of my concentration to make the right turns down the calm suburban streets and not U-turn away and back to a familiar brightly coloured house adorned with flowers.

Instead, I found myself where I was supposed to be; a two-storey grey house with pristinely chopped shrubs lining its smooth walls. I clutched at the front of my T-shirt with my hand, letting out a strained breath before moving to knock on the door. Before my fist could collide with the wood, the door gave way in front of me and a flurry of brown hair and perfume enveloped me.

"Wes!" Sofia laughed out, her arms latching around my neck as her body slammed into me. I swallowed as the soft curves of her body pressed against me, and I stiffly returned her hug, my hands patting her mid-back twice. Sofia soon pulled back from me, a wide, glowing smile on her face. Her smile softened a little as her eyes fluttered closed, her mouth pressing a chaste kiss against my closed lips. When she opened her eyes again, she took my hand gently. "I missed you."

"You saw me on Friday," I said, Sofia just snorting.

"I know. I still missed you though, idiot," Sofia said, tugging on my hand. "So you haven't eaten? Even though it's past lunch time, I made some eggs, bacon and toast for you. Oh, and coffee. Lots of coffee."

"You didn't have to, Sofia," I said, the girl in front of me waving her hand in the air, as if the thought smelled of something foul.

"I wanted to," Sofia assured me, pushing on my shoulders as we reached the dining room. "Now sit and I'll grab you the food." Giving me a lip-bitten smile, Sofia disappeared behind some white arches and reemerged with a tray full of food. My stomach rumbled as the smell of cooked eggs and bacon wafted through my nostrils.

"Thanks, Sof," I said gently, the girl just nodding with a serene smile on her face as she lowered herself into the chair beside mine. Her leg bumped against mine as I picked up the bacon and eggs and stuffed it between two slices of toast. The food was bland in my mouth, the eggs a little rubbery and the bacon tasting of oil. They were both semi-cold, probably having sat on a cooling skillet while I made my way to her house. The only things that were hot were the two slices of toast, which were lightly buttered and the only salvation to this meal. Swallowing quickly, my stomach happy to be filled nonetheless, I turned to Sofia and gave her a forced smile, the feeling making my face itch uncomfortably. "It's good, it's exactly what I needed."

"I could hear that," Sofia joked, gesturing to my stomach, which had now ceased its rumbling as I quickly finished the rest of the meal, also downing the bitter coffee that accompanied it. Once I was done, my cutlery neatly laying flat across the plate, Sofia moved to grab the dishes. Pushing her hands away, I shook my head and gathered the plates and mug myself.

"What a gentleman," Sofia giggled, following me into the kitchen, her hands gripping my waist as she stood behind me. I felt her hands slip forward, her arms now encircling my stomach as her face pressed against my back. I felt her inhale deeply, her arms tightening.

"Are you going to let me wash these dishes?" I asked, trying to keep my voice relaxed as Sofia's body heat began to burn.

"Nope," Sofia murmured against my back, making me force out a laugh that sounded flat to my ears.

"Well I'm going to anyway," I replied, ignoring the way Sofia's breasts pushed against my spine as I quickly washed the dishes. Sofia didn't let go even after I was done, my slightly damp hands prying hers off me. The were small in mine, and some of the detergent that clung to my hands dribbled

down her wrist. I gulped as Sofia took a step towards me, my body moving backwards in response, only to hit the edge of the kitchen counter. The cold stone dug into my back as Sofia only closed the space between us, her eyes half-lidded and her cheeks flushed.

" *Wes,"* Sofia breathed, grabbing the front of my shirt and pulling me down into a heated kiss. My mind went blank for a moment as her nails dug into the front of my shirt. I gasped when I felt Sofia's thighs clash with my own, almost wrapping themselves around one of my own legs. My hands, frozen and still wet, instinctively gripped onto Sofia's waist, the girl letting out a moan as the wetness seeped through her shirt and onto her skin.

Sofia's kiss was much, much more adventurous than last time; her mouth moved and her tongue coaxed, the inexperience in her touch overpowered by her excitement. Her tongue lapped at my lower lip, and they parted. Sofia let out a high moan as our tongues wrapped around each other, teeth bumping. Sofia's fingers left my chest and those on one hand wrapped themselves in my hair while the other covered one of mine which still laid flush against her hip.

"Wes, I want you to..." Sofia breathed against my lips, her voice uneven as she tried to draw in much needed air. The girl pressed short kisses against my mouth, my cheek and my jaw as her hand guided my own to the hem of her shirt. I tensed as she pulled it up her shirt, my hand brushing the expanse of her flat, soft stomach. She pulled it higher, and higher, until a small gasp left her lips as she pressed my hand against one of her breasts. The lace of her bra was a little scratchy and the fabric thin, her aroused nipple pressing against my palm. Her flesh was so soft, my stomach twisting as I began to feel a little light headed.

" Oh my god , *Wes,"* Sofia groaned. Her hand, still covering mine, pushed me to knead her waiting breast.

Soft.

I let out a choked noise as I ripped my hand away from her body, pushing my hands between us. Sofia looked up at me, shocked and a little hurt as she hastily pulled down her shirt, arms moving to cover her chest that had

been so exposed just a second before. My heart hammered as I slipped from between Sofia and the counter, my clothes in disarray and my mind even more so.

"S-Sorry," I stammered, eyes looking down at my feet as Sofia began to shake a little.

"Wes..." Sofia started, her voice so quiet that it made me look up. Her wide eyes were a little watery, and her lower lip, still bruised and slick, trembled. "Do you not... u-um..." Sofia's voice cracked as she searched my eyes, making me turn away again.

Just tell her the truth.

"Sofia, I..." I started, the words that I wanted to say clogging up my throat. They clawed and scratched, but as the tears began to well up on Sofia's lower lash line, they lost their grip and tumbled back down into the depths of my stomach.

"I just think we're moving a little fast." The lie was sour but easily rolled off my tongue. The guilt that accompanied it was bitter and festered. "I'm not... I'm not ready for, um... this kind of thing."

Sofia was silent for a moment, her fingers rubbing at her eyes as she swallowed a hiccup. Once she had her breathing under control, she peered up at me again, a small, relieved smile on her face.

"Thank god," Sofia said, her words followed by a heavy laugh. "I thought that you... didn't... Anyway, I'm glad. Um... I like that about you, you know."

"Like what?" I asked, swallowing thickly.

"You're honest," Sofia said, Nico's face flashing in my mind. "Most guys wouldn't admit that... but not you."

I'm not honest.

"I'm not..." I began, the words the most honest I have been all day.

"You are," Sofia replied, her voice so sure and so trusting that it only made me want to throw myself off a cliff. I couldn't move as Sofia pulled me into a hug, her cheek resting against my chest.

I'm not honest. I'm the worst.

~~~

I sighed heavily as Jamie ran her gloved fingers through my hair, the cheap plastic hand coverings rustling as the hair dye squelched. Jamie's hands stopped their movements, her elbows pushing on my shoulders as she looked down at me through the mirror.

"What are you sighing so heavily about, you sound like a young woman who just sent her husband off to fight in the war," Jamie said, snorting.

"Nothing," I said, rolling my eyes. My dismissing answer only made Jamie more curious, her body moving from behind me to the edge of the bath. Sitting herself down on the porcelain with her long legs crossed and her hands dangling in the air to not get dye all over herself, my sister just looked at me with a hint of worry.

"Doesn't look like nothing to me," Jamie said, shrugging. "You came home looking all pale and kind of out of it. What happened?"

"I told you, Jamie. *Nothing,* " I said, nose crinkling as a strand of hair slipped from my head and slapped against my forehead, the chemical scent of the dye stronger now.

"Ah, girl trouble then?" Jamie deduced, nodding to herself. "That's probably why you won't tell me."

" *Jamie,* " I said warningly, my sister only nodding a little harder.

"Yep, definitely girl trouble. Did someone reject your love, my poor little brother?" Jamie said, letting out a fake sob. "Young love, so tragic."

She didn't reject me. I rejected her, although not completely.
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"Seriously, Jamie, it's nothing. I'm just stressed with school, and assignments, and exams are coming up at the end of the year and I'm nowhere near ready," I said, lying through my teeth. Jamie just looked at me with her head tilted, before sighing herself.

"Fine, I'll drop it. Just don't come home looking so glum, okay? That sad face suits you even less than the blonde, and that's a whole fucking lot."

"Wow, I can really feel the love," I replied in monotone, Jamie giving me a smile before ruffling my hair with her dye-covered glove.

"Yeah, yeah, I love you *so* much. Now tilt your head this way so I can get the side of your stupid head," Jamie commanded, forcing my head to the side before squeezing some more dye onto the palm of her hand. "By the time I'm done with you, there won't be any girl rejecting you, trust me." I couldn't help but laugh as Jamie messed with my hair playfully, her eyes softening as I did so. "See? Already looking better."

"Thanks, Jamie," I said, feeling a little lighter, though no less guilty.

I'll let Sofia down soon.

Hopefully.

TWENTY

I swatted Nico's hands away from my head, rolling my eyes. Nico just grinned as he pulled my arms down into my lap, his other hand continuing to pull and tug on my newly darkened strands.

"Is this actually your natural colour?" Nico asked, his face genuinely in awe as he ran his fingers through the brown strands.

"Yep, naturally from the box," I said flatly, ducking away from his touchy-feely hands again, glaring at him warningly. "It's been almost a week already, Nico. The novelty should have worn off by now."

"It's just so..." Nico started, trailing off as his face morphed into one of exaggerated pensiveness.

"Boring?" I offered, filling in the blank. Nico shook his head quickly, nose crinkling.

"No, it's just that I'm not used to seeing you with dark hair. It suits you," Nico said, his words and the accompanying lopsided smile making me blush. I coughed as I pulled the sleeves of my woollen jumped over my hands, bringing them upwards to cover my rosy cheeks.

"I'd hope so, since it's what I was born with," I sighed, shaking my head so my hair began to fall from my face. It had grown out a significant amount since the beginning of the term, and unless pushed back with gel it would fall over my eyes like a bad sunshade. I blew on the unruly chestnut brown strands with gusto, only for them to flop back down across my eyes. Nico chuckled as I blew again, my cheeks ballooning.

I didn't stop Nico from reaching forward to brush the hair out from my eyes, his fingers trailing down my warmed cheeks afterwards. Nico's relaxed, close-lipped smile deepened as I leaned into his touch, almost nuzzling his palm like a domesticated animal.

I didn't know when Nico's presence had become so normal, but it was when he wasn't there that I felt his presence even more. Sofia was all over me at school, and the only moments of reprieve that I could find were those last few moments at the end of lunch break where I darted off to the back of the pool, knowing that Nico would already be there waiting. He had become my escape, and I found myself wanting to be by his side more than before. Actually *wanted. Craved* . Those cursed moments of realisation tended to be when I was lying in bed late at night, the sheets a little cold and the bed a little too big. Sometimes I caught myself thinking that it would be nice to feel his warmth beside me, his arms wrapped around my waist as he pulled me in close. I wondered how it would feel to wake up to the smell of his shampoo and his husky voice as he grumbled at the sun's rude attempts to rouse him into consciousness. The thought alone made me shiver, Nico frowning beside me.

"You're cold?" Nico asked, already beginning to shrug off his own sweater, my heart lurching. I pat his arm and shook my head, Nico tilting his head to the side questioningly, his arms sliding back through the larger arm holes.

"I'm not cold," I reassured him, tucking my knees to my chest. It had indeed gotten a little colder, the term being well into autumn now. The swimming pool storeroom was particularly chilled, with no heating unit being installed since it wasn't intended for people to spend their lunch hours cuddling in.

"You have goosebumps," Nico commented, pinching the back of my neck where my skin had begun to prickle. I blushed, knowing that the bumps weren't because I was cold, but because my body was growing hot with the thought of waking up with Nico in bed.

Thank god for the cold weather.

It wasn't long before I felt Nico slide behind me, his strong arms wrapping around my front. His hands clasped his opposite biceps, encasing me in a cage of muscle and tattoos. Nico only had to flex those ropes of muscle slightly to pull me in close, my back nestled against his chest with my head tucked under his chin. He had a little stubble, which scraped at the top of my head, but I didn't mind it.

I didn't mind any of it.

"I told you I wasn't cold," I said, trying to make my voice sound annoyed, though the small smile on my face said otherwise. I shivered again as Nico chuckled, his embrace tightening.

"Mhmm, I know," Nico said, his hum a chesty rumble.

"You don't need to warm me up," I pressed again, though I buried myself further into his chest, leaning into the warmth I found there.

"I know," Nico said again, my head moving to rest on his shoulder. I turned it slightly to look at him, most of his face obscured by his structured jaw which was softened as he smiled. I could just make out the profile of his lip ring from my lower angle, my eyes following its movements as Nico spoke.

"Well, as long as you know," I said, Nico chuckling as he nodded. The two of us sat there until the lunch break ended. I frowned as the bell's drone filtered under the gaps in the storeroom door, not wanting to remove myself from Nico's comfortable arms. My heart fluttered when Nico's arms pulled a little tighter as I tried to get up, cementing my position in his embrace.

It was times like this that I wondered if Nico wanted to be by my side too.

The thought would only last for a fleeting moment, before absurdity took over. That's what the thought was; absurd. The more time I spent with him, the more I forgot that he was *Nico Beckett* .

"Nico, let go, I have to get to class," I said, voice a little hard as I forcefully pried his hands off me, standing up before he could pull me down again. Nico just looked up at me languidly, his hand fishing in his pocket for a cigarette. I grimaced at the sight of it, Nico's eyes just lighting up in amusement at my reaction.

"See you tomorrow?" Nico asked, and I began to nod my head, until I realised that I had plans. The long weekend had approached faster than I had thought it would, and tomorrow I was leaving for the beach resort with

my mum, Jamie, and my dad, who was arriving from his overseas business trip tonight.

"Um, no, I'm actually going away for the weekend," I said, Nico raising a brow. "With my family. Um, yeah. Sorry." I wondered why I felt the need to apologise; we hadn't made plans, or had any obligation to see each other every weekend. But still, something about not seeing Nico on the weekend made me feel a little uncomfortable, like there was an itch that I couldn't quite reach in the depths of my stomach.

"Sounds fun," Nico said, sucking in a drag of his cigarette, the smoke swirling in his mouth before he exhaled. Nico then stood up, grinning as he spoke. "Don't miss me too much, Wes."

I snorted at his words, waving them away along with his smoke.

"I won't miss you at all," I said adamantly, Nico just grinning a little wider. The smile on his face made my veins throb in annoyance.

"Sure, Wes," Nico said, stepping towards me. Pressing a hard kiss that tasted like nicotine against my lips, Nico smiled knowingly as he retracted his step, the distance between us growing.

"See you next week then, Wes."

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Benny let out an excited cry as he immediately dropped his bags at the front door of our resort lodgings, running through the white-walled beach house with his arms out wide. Jamie rolled her eyes at his antics, though she still grinned as she looked around. Dad had called in late last night saying that he couldn't come back for the long weekend due to sudden work commitments, and I couldn't help but be disappointed. It had been months since I last saw him, and even then it had only been for a week. Jamie wasn't too upset about dad not coming, her face just drawing tighter after mum hung up the phone last night. Since we had a spare space, Benny had somehow been invited to come along, not that I minded. Benny and I had
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been friends since we were undergoing potty training, and naturally he was also familiar with Jamie and my mum.

As I ran my hand along the large light wood table in the centre of the house's dining area, Mum pat my shoulders from behind and sighed happily in my ear.

"Just like the pictures, hey honey?" mum said, making me nod.

"Too bad dad couldn't come," I said, mum's hands on my shoulders freezing a little, before she gave them a tight squeeze.

"Yes, well, duty calls," mum said, giving me a tensed smile before pushing on my shoulders lightly. "Go take a look around! If you want, you could go check out the beach with your sister and Benny? It's just across the road."

"Yeah, sure mum," I said, my mother nodding happily as she pulled out a novel from her back, her eyes immediately setting its sights on the hammock that was spread out on the back porch. I smiled as she made a beeline to the hammock, her body the most fluid and relaxed I have seen it in a while. She deserved a break, but I wished that she could have shared it with dad.

"Oh my god, Wes, have you *seen* the beach?" Benny screeched, pulling me towards the large floor-to-ceiling windows. "It's huge! Let's go, let's go!" Benny's heels bobbed up and down as he almost shoved my head into the glass windows in excitement.

There was a loud smack, Benny yelping as a sudden blow to the back of his head sent his forehead careening into the glass. Benny whirled around, glare searing itself into his features, as Jamie just smirked at him. Already clad in a bright red bikini, a loose beach dress layered on top of it and her sunglasses perched on her head. Her hair was tied into a loose plait, which looped around her neck to dangle over her shoulder.

"Are you kids coming to the beach or not?" Jamie laughed, Benny sticking his tongue out at her before quickly racing to change into his own bathing suit. I laughed at Benny's interaction with my sister, wondering if he was

somehow related to us; Jamie saw him as her second younger brother, and Benny made it his mission to torment her as a younger brother would. Jamie would often joke that since I wasn't a handful, the universe decided to dump Benny on us to make up for it.

The three of us were soon at the beach, and as soon as I laid down the large beach towel onto the fine, golden sand, Jamie was already throwing her things on top of it and pulling her dress over her head. Benny was quick to follow her, his legs almost tripping on themselves as he rushed after Jamie to plunge into the water. I grinned as I covered my eyes from the sun, watching Jamie cackle as she pushed Benny's back roughly, his body flailing in the air before tumbling into the waves.

"Hey, Wes, come on!" Benny called out while waving, shaking his headful of water with a wide grin on his face.

"One second!" I yelled back, pulling out my phone. I squinted my eyes at the screen, which was shadowed by the blinding glare of the sun above my head. Flicking through it, I blinked as I saw that Nico had replied to my message from the car ride in the morning. I smiled a little, wondering if he had just woken up.

Nico Beckett - 3:12pm
U at the beach yet?

Wesley Dillon - 3:14pm
Yep
-Image sent-

I quickly took a quick picture of the beach, sending it to Nico before I could even register what I was doing. Why was I sharing pictures of where I was with him? I doubted that he even cared to know.

Unable to take the image back, the little thumbnail of the still waves and soft sand blinking in the corner, I anxiously waited for Nico's reply.

Nico Beckett - 3:15pm
U must miss me, Wes

I audibly choked on my own saliva as I read his message, the words echoing in my head in Nico's voice. I quickly turned my phone off, throwing it deep into the pile of clothes on the towel. Pulling my own T-shirt on top of it, I slapped my cheeks before slowly making my way over to Jamie and Benny, the latter currently stuck in Jamie's headlock as his arms floundered in the water and the former laughing with amusement. Jumping into the shallow water, I dunked my head under the waves, blowing out heated bubbles as I tried to cool my burning cheeks.

I didn't miss him. Not one bit.

A/N: I feel like Nico wouldn't have snapchat. Like, he would get so bored with that shit so quickly, or people from school would just spam him with nude pics or whatever haha But if it's pics of Wes I'm sure he wouldn't mind ;)

TWENTY-ONE

I rolled over in the bed, moving slowly to not wake Benny up, though I doubt that even a hurricane would even make the guy even move. Benny's mouth hung wide open, a little drool dribbling at the left corner of his mouth, and a throaty snore drifted in and out of his gaping lips. I silently groaned, burrowing my head under my pillow in a bid to try and shut out the loud noise. I shut my eyes hard, face scrunching as I tried to will myself to sleep, but my senses were too alert and my mind too active to even begin to drift off into sleep.

It was already past two in the morning, and the moon was shining high and silver in the sky. Benny mumbled something about flying chocolate squirrels, his hand flicking off the blanket to scratch his bare stomach. Rolling over again, body restless, I looked over at my best friend enviously. He was blissfully asleep, his mouth now closed in a half smile as his eyes fluttered beneath his lids with a dream. Benny grumbled something about the squirrels melting, rolling over onto his side so his back was facing me.

I nestled my head further up on my pillow, eyes blinking as I stared at Benny's back; his shoulders were broad, but his build a little pudgier than Nico's. His shirt rode up his torso, exposing his lower spine and the taper of his stomach which disappeared into his boxers. I sighed as Benny shivered a little after pushing the blanket off his body, and pulled the fabric over his exposed skin. As the slither of flesh disappeared under the blanket, I realised that looking at Benny, I didn't feel a thing. Seeing his bare skin did absolutely nothing for me, not like Nico's.

I gulped as I looked at Benny's back, imagining the wider, stronger frame of the tattooed boy I plucked from my memories. Benny's hair began to slowly morph into black, semi-wavy locks and the skinnier bare arms that lay above the white blanket bulged with muscle and became covered in dark tattoos. I felt my mouth become wet as Benny turned onto his stomach, the blanket sliding off his torso again to unveil his abdominal area once again. Instead of seeing Benny's lean indentations, I could only remember Nico's

layers of hard muscle rising and falling as he lay on his back, and the feeling of those muscles under my finger tips. My hands twitched as I found myself reaching forward, Benny stirring as the bed dipped under my shifted weight.

"Fucking hell," I cursed, nimbly climbing out of bed in a hurry. My movements were fast, the bed only shaking slightly, Benny rolling over. Benny's mouth flopped open again, a long, deep snore gurgling at the back of his throat. I let out a frustrated breath before grabbing my glasses off the bedside table, sliding them onto my nose bridge. I unplugged my phone from its charger and slipped my arms through my blue zip-up hoodie, which clashed with the bright green checkers of my pyjama bottoms. Jamming my feet into my black thongs, I didn't think too much of my outfit at this time of the night, grabbing one set of keys to the beach house and quietly creeping outside to try and still my restless heart.

The night air was crisp and I shivered when the sea breeze drifted through my thin layers of clothing. I tried to keep my mind as clear as the night sky as I walked down to the beach, the whole area silent bar the rhythmic crashing of the waves and the rustle of overlying tree branches. I found my breathing steady as the expanse of the beach came into view beyond the low-lying fronds of the palm trees, kicking my thongs off my feet to bury my toes into the soft sand. What had once been hot to the touch during the day had cooled to just a warm glow, my feet happily sinking into the plush ground.

Walking over to the rocky area of the beach, I climbed onto a short, smooth rock and sat down. I let out a contented sigh when my feet dipped into the cool water just below me, my toes managing to scrape the sand in the shallow puddle.

Leaning against some rocks behind me, I began to look through my phone, stopping on the unfinished conversation I had with Nico just this afternoon.

Nico Beckett - 3:15pm
U must miss me, Wes

"Cocky ass," I muttered quietly, my voice jarring in my serene surroundings. Nico's words made me uncomfortable, that itching, pained feeling returning to my stomach. I had been pondering over these simple words all day; they crept into my mind amongst the waves, while I ate dinner, while I showered. They popped in whenever they pleased without a care for my sanity, bulldozing through whatever mundane thoughts were occupying my consciousness. Thoughts of Nico were much like the boy himself; forceful, unrelenting and utterly, utterly vexing.

My forefinger tapped against the side of my phone with irritation, Nico's words still stuck on my screen. I had been in this position a few times this afternoon already, each time typing and then erasing a reply, none of them quite right. Now, it was far too late to respond to his message, though my fingers were itching to do so. It made me antsy to leave his message alone, but my desire to reply was trumped by my indecision about *what* to say.

I don't fucking miss you.

Shut up, asshole.

Don't be so full of yourself.

Fuck off.

Fuck no.

I typed and backspaced through all of these, sighing heavily after each one. My fingers paused before I slowly typed another response, my fingers slow and laborious, as if they were being dragged through thick tar.

I miss you.

BZZZZ BZZZZ. BZZZZ BZZZZ.

"What the fuck!" I yelped, my phone suddenly shaking in my hand violently, my message screen morphing into a call receiving display. My fingers fumbled with the vibrating device, the little rectangle falling. My thighs slapped together, the phone lodged between them and just out of

reach of the water below. My heart thundered, both from the sudden phone call and the fear of my phone being submerged size feet under the sea. When I saw the caller ID on the display, I choked.

Nico Beckett.

"Oh my fucking God is he psychic or something?" I choked, hands jerky as I held the screen up to my face, thumb poised over the answering button.

I miss you.

My finger slid across the screen, and I placed the phone to me ear, trying not to breathe too loudly. My chest felt tight as I closed my eyes, inhaling.

"Nico?" I whispered, my voice a little too shaky for my liking, though I hoped through the phone it sounded steadier. My leg shook as Nico chuckled into the receiver, the wind blowing across my face as he spoke.

"So you're awake. Thinking about me?" Nico teased, his voice dropping at the end of his sentence. I spluttered, hand gripping my knee as I leaned over, feet splashing.

"Hell no, you conceited prick," I snapped, Nico just snorting. Clearing my throat, I continued. "I just... couldn't sleep. Benny snores like a fucking vacuum."

"He's with you?" Nico asked, followed by the screech of wheels and the grating of a handbrake. There was the quiet sound of the radio playing, though it was too quiet to make out the song. Frowning, I wondered where Nico was.

"Are you driving right now?" I asked, Nico dismissing my question with a short 'yeah', his voice sounding a little distracted. "That's not safe, you know. Don't talk on the phone when you drive, idiot."

"Why's Benny with you?" Nico asked, ignoring my concern. My frown deepened as I sat up a little straighter, Nico's voice strangely serious.

"Why does it matter?" I asked, genuinely confused as Nico remained silent. When he didn't say anything, the silence becoming a little too deafening, I sighed. "My dad... he's stuck at work, so he couldn't come. It would be a waste of the beach house with one less person, so Benny tagged along."

"And you're sleeping together?" Nico asked, making me almost drop my phone again, a strangled noise escaping my mouth. The way Nico said it, his voice dangerously low and a little rough around the syllables made it seem that he wasn't quite asking about sharing a bed, but sharing many others things *in a bed.*

" *What?"* I asked, voice squeaky. "Are we sleeping- What are you- No. We're sharing a bed. Sleeping. Just sleeping. Together. But not like, *together* together. I mean, it's better that he sleeps with me than my sister. Or my mum. Oh my god that's not what I-" I stammered, thoughts racing as I remembered Benny's exposed torso and how I had imagined it to be Nico's. " *No one is sleeping with anyone* ."

Nico was silent as I rambled, and I began to grow antsy.

"Nico, seriously, I'm not-"

Nico's laugh cut me off, the rich noise soothing in my ear despite my twisted stomach.

"I was just joking, Wes," Nico said, his voice a little breathless as he reeled in his laughter, though his words seemed a little tense. "You getting flustered honestly does you no favours."

"Shut up," I grunted, splashing my feet in the water to dispel some of the tension in my body. It didn't work. "A-Anyway. Why are you driving so late? Where are you?"

A girl's house?

Nico took a few moments to reply, my nerves heightened. I knew I shouldn't care so much about where he went - and with whom - but something about being so far from him and not knowing what was going on

made me anxious. I knew that our relationship had changed. That *I* had changed. I... enjoyed Nico's company, and wanted more and more of it each time I saw him. Talking to him had become so easy, and I no longer shied away from his intimate touches or hungry kisses. Nico had begun to fill my day in every way possible, but I feared that I was not the same for him. I *knew* I wasn't the same for him.

I mean, who was I to Nico Beckett? He had all the girls falling at his feet, and God knows how many of them had spread their legs for him in his bed. The bed with the sheets that smelled like him, and the mattress that dipped in the middle in his shape. And then there was me. Just me. I was just the boy who drank too much and happened to stumble into the right room and the right time. Two seconds later, it could have been another boy stumbling in there, hazy-eyed and pliable. It could have been another guy in the passenger seat of Nico's car, another guy kissing him in his empty house, fulfilling his curiosity in lying with a man. It could have been anyone, not just me.

But I knew that for me, it couldn't be just anyone.

"Wes?" Nico asked, snapping me from my thoughts.

"Y-Yeah?" I stammered, Nico sighing.

"Did you fall asleep on me?" Nico asked, gasping with false offence. I managed to give a short laugh at his piss-poor acting, but I could hear Nico's smile in his voice.

"I'm still here," I said, Nico humming. "What were you saying?"

"You asked me where I am," Nico said, chuckling. "Currently, I'm on the side of the freeway on my way home."

"At 2am," I thought to myself, wondering whose house he just left in the middle of the night. It didn't matter who, the thought itself irked me every which way.

"From where?" I managed to ask, hoping my voice sounded somewhat normal. Nico didn't seem to pick up on anything as he replied in a slightly bored tone, the background noise of his car beeping signalling that he had begun driving again. "Hey, don't talk while driving, Nico."

"Worried about me?" Nico asked, his smirk laced in his words.

"Not at all," I said quickly, though my heart settled when I heard Nico pull over again. "I just... it would be a stupid way for you to die."

"So you *are* worried about me," Nico said, voice smug. I didn't bother to dissuade him, settling on sighing audibly.

"So where were you all night?" I asked, ignoring Nico's snicker at my exasperation.

"Work," was his simple reply, making me unfurl my clenched hands in relief. I hadn't realised that they had been closed so tightly, the little crescents my nails made in my palm a little purple.

"Work?" I repeated, Nico humming in confirmation. "You work?"

"Don't sound so surprised, Wes," Nico laughed. "Bell's retired, and her pension isn't really enough for the two of us. I've got to pull my own weight, even though the wages are pretty shit. There isn't much you can do when you're still in school."

"Where do you work?"

"Bar in the city," Nico said simply, and I blinked.

"A bar? Aren't you too young to-"

"I'm 18," Nico reminded me, and I felt like an idiot for not recalling that Nico was a year older than me having flunked school last year.

"But still," I said, legs swinging as I swapped my phone to my other ear, closing my eyes to try and pick up the faint sounds of Nico's breaths as he listened. "Isn't it... hard? With school and everything."

"There's a reason why I usually show up late to school," Nico said, amused. "Though I would still come late even if I didn't work."

"That's... I didn't expect that," I admitted. "Do you work every day?"

"Most days. I usually work Fridays and weekends, and either Wednesdays or Thursdays depending on the week. Mondays and Tuesdays are usually my nights off."

"So you work Sundays?" I asked. "But lately you've been coming to school on Monday mornings. Wouldn't you be, you know, tired?"

"Someone's been taking notes, have they?" Nico said, voice teasing as my ears heated. "I'm flattered."

" *Don't be* ," I said coldly, Nico just chuckling.

"You're right though," Nico responded. I heard the light background music from Nico's radio turn off followed by some squeaks as Nico shifted in the driver's seat.

"Right?"

"I have been going to school more often." Nico's words felt incomplete, like there was something attached to the end that was still submerged. Pulling my feet out of the water and tucking them beneath me, I rested my chin on my bent knees, focusing on Nico's voice in the phone.

"Is there a reason for that?" I asked quietly.

"There is." I could feel Nico's smile through the phone, my eyes closing.

"Really...? What is it, then?"

"Not so much of a 'what', more like a 'who'..." Nico said, the smile in his voice growing. I felt my heart tighten as a grin began to pull at the corners of my mouth.

"Oh? Do I know this person?"

"You might," Nico said, laughing lightly. "He's a little skinny, brown eyes, kind of a nerd. Also had a really bad dye job. Sound familiar?"

"Not in the slightest," I grumbled, smile falling from my face as Nico snorted.

"Hm, that's a shame," Nico said, pausing for a moment, before speaking again. "He's actually a really good guy."

Nico's words swelled within me, and I covered my mouth with my hand to suppress the surprised noise that almost spilled from it.

"Is he now?" I asked, my voice dropping to a whisper.

"He is," Nico said, voice as steady as the waves crashing against the rocks. "Well, most of the time. He's also very dishonest and stubborn, which pisses me off." I snorted at his words, but smiled anyway.

"Sounds like a great guy," I said, a sudden yawn overtaking me as I spoke.

"Yeah. It's a little past his bed time, though. He should probably go to sleep." Nico's words made me feel both warm and a little sad. My phone was pressed tightly to my ear, wanting to drink in every dulcet tone that came out of Nico's mouth. Another yawn captured my mouth, eyes watering a little as I rubbed them.

"I think he should too."

But he doesn't want to sleep. Not yet. Not now.

"Good night, Wes," Nico said, addressing me directly in a gentle voice that made me ache. There were so many things on the tip of my tongue that were just waiting to unfurl, but I swallowed them back painfully.

"Good night, Nico. Drive safely," was all I could get out, Nico chuckling.

"I will." The phone line beeped as Nico hung up then, my phone dropping limply to my side.

"I miss you," I murmured into the sea, hoping that the waves would carry the words all the way to Nico, but knowing that they wouldn't.

I stayed on that beach for a few more minutes, before my eyes began to grow heavy and my yawns more frequent. It did not take me long to return to bed and drift off to sleep, my last thought a wish that the figure lying next to me was someone else.

A/N: Before you're all like 'omg Wes and his tHoNGs', I again state that I'm Australian and to us thongs are flip flops, not a mildly uncomfortable underwear style lol

Anywho, thanks for reading this chapter - it means a whole lot to me x

TWENTY-TWO

Benny and I sat at the dining table, Benny almost facepalming his pancakes as he dozed off despite having a good night's sleep. I was also tired, having fallen asleep in the early hours of the morning and waking up prematurely as the blinding sun invaded our room. Benny had begrudgingly pulled himself out of bed at the promise of pancakes courtesy of my mum, though at this rate he would fall asleep in them rather than eat them.

I flicked Benny's forehead with my finger as his head began to dip downwards, his nose almost brushing the syrup that thoroughly soaked his pancakes. Benny yelped, head flying backwards as his chair skittered backwards in surprise. Benny shot me a glare, his bed head flapping as he glowered.

"The hell was that for?" Benny whined, rubbing his nose that had a lick of syrup on its tip. Frowning as he looked down, Benny realised that I had just saved him from a very sticky situation. Literally. "Oh, thanks, I guess. Could have been gentler though, man." Benny sighed as he rubbed his forehead, making me laugh.

"I should be the one dozing off right now," I said, leaning my head on my hand as I gave Benny a raised brow, pointing to the dark circles under my eyes. "Do you even *know* how bad your snoring is?"

"Nope," Benny said, snickering.

"Lucky you then," I drawled, stuffing a triangular stack of pancake into my mouth, swallowing quickly. Benny just grinned, folding up a large stack of pancakes and shoving it into his mouth, his cheeks ballooning.

"Where's Jamie?" Benny asked through his chews, looking towards Jamie's bedroom. The door was still shut and there were no sounds coming from inside the room. Looking at the time - just past 9am - Jamie was definitely still asleep.

"Probably dead asleep," I said, Benny snorting.

" *Of course she is* ," Benny said, rolling his eyes. "I swear she sleeps like a fucking-" Benny snapped his mouth shut as he cast a careful glance towards my mum, who definitely heard his foul language but ignored it, though her mouth twitched. "Like a log," Benny finished, clearing his throat.

"That's what university does to you, apparently," I said, shrugging.

"I can't wait," Benny sighed, looking into the distance wistfully.

"You actually have to graduate from highschool first, my friend," I said, grinning. "Set some achievable goals first, okay?"

"Fu- I mean, bugger off," Benny said, my mum chuckling under her breath as she flipped a pancake, a light sizzle heard in the background. I opened my mouth to tease Benny again, but was cut off as my phone vibrated loudly on the table. Its shakes made it skitter across the table towards Benny, who glanced at the calle ID. His eyes immediately lit up with a suggestive gleam, a mild smirk on his face as he whistled.

"What?" I asked, frowning at Benny's expression before picking up my phone. My stomach dropped and my frown deepened when I read the text on the screen.

Sofia.

"Well that's not the face you should be making when your *girlfriend* calls you," Benny said, snickering.

"She's not my girlfriend," I said quickly, the word sour in my mouth. Benny just hummed as he discarded my words. I swallowed as I continued to stare at the ongoing call, Benny leaning over to nudge my arm.

"So... you going to answer that or not?" Benny asked, making me cough.

"Y-yeah, of course," I said, sliding my finger across the call screen. The vibrations stopped and I cleared my throat again. "Hey, Sof."

" *Wes! You finally picked up* ," Sofia said, her voice a light, airy chime in the receiver.

"Yeah, sorry, I was, um, busy," I said, Benny giving me a raised brow. I kicked his shin under the table, my friend feigning immense pain as he keeled over, making me shoot him a short look.

" *Oh, no, it's fine, Wes,* " Sofia said, laughing softly. " *Anyway, so you know how you told me you guys were going to Sorrento..."*

"Y-yeah?" I stammered again, already dreading how the conversation was going. Benny had crawled back up from his playful position on the ground, eyes curious as I began to nervously sweat. 'What's happening?' Benny mouthed to me, and I shook my head, giving him a pointed index finger to tell him to wait.

" *Well, Parker and I wanted to go on a trip somewhere since we were both bored, so we decided to go to Sorrento as well!* "

"Oh," was all I could get out, the feeling of dread now blossoming into one of disappointment. Either Sofia didn't pick up on my reluctance to celebrate at this news, or she was too preoccupied with her own excitement as she continued to talk.

"We're actually in the car on the way there now! Where are you guys going to be in about an hour? We can meet you there! " Sofia's voice was chirpy, but my head was beginning to throb and my stomach grow queasy. I felt terrible at my inner want to not see the girl, knowing that she had no ill intentions and just genuinely wanted to spend time with us. With me. Not wanting to spend time with her and feeling guilty about not wanting to was just swirling inside in a vicious, never-ending cycle.

"Oh, that sounds... great," I said, voice hitching as Benny kicked my leg under the table, eyes asking me what's happening.

"Right? It'll be fun if the four of us can meet up! Ugh, it sucks that Rach and Leo can't make it though."

"Yeah, right," I said, managing to push out a laugh. "Um, well, we're eating breakfast right now so maybe we can meet at the beach?"

I'd rather not though.

"Yeah, that sounds good! I'll call you again when we're closer, but Parker drives like a damned grandma so cross your fingers," Sofia giggled, and I cracked a genuine smile as I heard Parker protest in the background.

"Fingers crossed," I said after swallowing the knots in my throat, Sofia laughing again, the sound carefree. "Talk to you later, Sofia."

"Yeah, Wes," Sofia said, before her voice dropped to a whisper. *"I miss you, by the way. I can't wait to see you.* " I sucked in a tight breath at her words, my head throbbing as the mild nausea swelled.

"Yeah, me too. See you soon," I said, wanting to slap myself. I didn't allow myself to linger, hanging up the phone quickly and pressing it against the table.

"So?" Benny asked, licking some syrup off his fingers as I pushed my plate away. Benny looked at my half finished food, and I nodded, Benny grinning greedily as he pulled my plate towards him and shovelled some more pancake into his gluttonous mouth.

"Sofia and Parker are coming down here," I said, trying not to look too downcast at the news. Benny raised a brow, before his eyes narrowed as his lips curled upwards.

" *Oh* ," Benny said, nudging me with his elbow. "She couldn't stay away from you, hey?"

"Stop, Ben, it's not like that," I said, rolling my eyes though I could still hear Sofia's soft voice in my head.

I miss you.

"Doesn't look like it from where I'm sitting," Benny said, brow wiggling.

"Then you're sitting in the wrong position," I said, Benny just shrugging with that infuriating grin on his face. "Fuck off, Benny."

"Wesley, language," my mum called over her shoulder, making me frown. Benny's shit-eating grin just widened as I scowled, getting up from my chair.

"Finish eating you fat-ass, let's go to the beach before they get here," I said, Benny nodding as he lifted the plate up to his face to push the rest of its contents into his mouth with his fork. I just shook my head as he thanked my mum for the meal mid-chew, Leanne just waving behind her with a smile on her face.

At least I had an hour or two before Parker and Sofia got here. After that... I would just hope that Sofia didn't try to push anything between us.

Because I wasn't sure if I had the nerves to push her away.

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I tapped my feet on the heated pavement, my thongs slapping against the ground. Benny was sitting on top of the railing that fenced off the beach sand, his tongue lapping at a rapidly melting ice cream cone. Jamie was sitting beside him eating her own ice cream equally as messily, dripping some of the sweet treat onto her chest just above the fabric of her red bikini top. I sighed at the two of them looking so relaxed while I was just a ball of tensed muscle waiting for Sofia and Parker to arrive.

"Sit down, Wes," Jamie said, smirking as I began to pace.

"Oh, leave him be," Benny said, his expression mirroring Jamie's as the two of them shared a look. "He's just nervous since his girlfriend is going to be here soon."

"What did you say her name was again? Sofia?" Jamie asked, Benny nodding.
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"She's not 'my girlfriend'," I emphasised, the two of them ignoring me as Benny went on to tell Jamie all about Sofia and I. Jamie just choked on her laughter as she gave me a once over, shaking her head incredulously.

"Honestly? I don't get what Sofia sees in him. He's just so..." Jamie said, waving her ice-cream free hand in the air as she pondered over the right word to describe me.

"Yeah, yeah, I get it," I said, frowning at my sister's words. I honestly didn't understand what Sofia saw in me either. If anything, I was a total dick. I was just too cowardly to admit it, and Sofia was just too nice to recognise it.

Soon enough, Parker's beat-up car pulled into a carpark in front of us, Sofia waving from inside. Jamie stood up, slinging an arm over my shoulder as she grinned.

"Oh, she's cute," Jamie said, nodding approvingly. "Makes me question even more why she's into you. The world really works in mysterious ways."

"Shut up, Jamie," I retorted tiredly as Sofia and Parker exited the car. Sofia's smile faltered when she saw me, her eyes darting between me and Jamie, her cheeks reddening as her eyes grew downcast. Parker's eyes, however, bulged out of his head as his mouth popped open, unable to look away from Jamie.

"Hey guys," Benny cheerily greeted, giving Sofia a hug and Parker a short pat on the back, both of them ignoring him as they stared at both Jamie and I.

"W-Wes, who is this?" Sofia asked, her voice small and meek as she glanced at us, her fingers wringing in front of her. Jamie gave her an amused look, pulling her arm away from me as I sighed.

"Parker, Sofia, this is my sister, Jamie," I said, wincing as Sofia immediately perked up, a beaming smile etching itself onto her face as she bounded forward.

"Oh, nice to meet you!" Sofia said, reaching out her hand to shake Jamie's, feet bobbing with excitement. "I'm Sofia." Jamie laughed at Sofia's exuberance, and hugged her instead of taking her hand. When they parted, Jamie turned back to me to mouth 'she's cute' and shoot me a suggestive brow, making me blush and shake me head adamantly.

"And I'm Parker," the boy cut in, stepping in front of Sofia to extend his hand towards my sister. Benny and I shared a look as Parker schooled his mouth into a brilliant smile, eyes slight while he straightened his back and ran his fingers through his hair. I almost audibly groaned when I saw Parker's eyes drop from my sister's face to her body, in particular her bikini-clad chest and the short denim skirt she had wrapped around her hips. Looking at Benny again, I rolled my eyes at his entertained face, which looked like he was watching the best romantic comedy of all time. All he needed was some popcorn and a reclining chair and it would look like he's at the cinemas.

"Is he flirting with Jamie?" Benny whispered to me, snorting. I nodded heavily, shaking my head as I watched Jamie suppress a laugh, taking his hand as his face grew red with the contact.

"Jamie," my sister said, pulling her hand back to untie her hair, which had been wound in a tight knot on top of her head. I felt a little ill when I saw Parker lick his lips as he watched her hair fall around her shoulders, his eyes trailing as she pulled her hair across to one shoulder, exposing the long line of her neck. Jamie's amused expression at Parker's clear interest in her made Benny and I try not to laugh.

"Watching Jamie mess with him is a little sad," Benny said, placing a hand over his heart. "Let us all pray for Parker."

"Amen," I said, before Sofia stepped to my side, her hand sliding into mine. I suddenly began to sweat, and not because of the heat.

"Now that everyone's here, we should swim," I said, turning towards the beach. My fingers were stiff as Sofia gripped them, and I tried to ignore Benny and Jamie's less-than-sly glances at our interlocked hands. Sofia

smiled and nodded at my words, giving me arm a little tug as she began to walk to the beach.

This was going to be a less relaxing trip than I had hoped.

A/N: Sorry for being 2 days late with this chapter - uni got the better of me unfortunately. The next chapter should be out on Monday as per usual! Thanks for reading, and I hope you enjoyed :)

TWENTY-THREE

I gulped as Sofia began to pull off her outer clothes, revealing the baby pink one piece they hid underneath. Her swim suit was by no means revealing, the bodice covering more of her skin than Jamie's bikini even pretended to do, but the way it pulled Sofia's curves in made it more provocative than she probably intended it to. Her fuller chest was pushed inwards, cleavage peeking out from behind the ruffles of the chest area. Thick straps wrapped around her shoulders to cross at the back, the swimsuit cutting up her hips and exposing her shapely thighs. I noticed a few people glancing at her as she tied her hair up in a loose braid, exposing the smooth skin of her neck.

"Hey Wes, help me with sunscreen? I can't get my back," Sofia said, her cheeks pink as she held out the bottle of lotion towards me. Benny and Jamie looked at each other before Benny grabbed Parker's arm, the boy stumbling as he stared longingly after Jamie, who begun running towards the water. As Benny and Parker followed after her, Benny turned back towards me to give me a thumbs up and a brow wiggle, making me swallow thickly.

"Uh, yeah, no problem," I said, making sure I didn't brush her hand as I took the bottle from her. Sofia smiled as she turned around, pulling her plait over her shoulder to reveal the back of her neck to me.

"Make sure you get it everywhere, I don't want to burn," Sofia said, her voice quiet as I took a tentative step towards her. Squirting some of the white liquid onto my hands, the squelch sounding a little obscene, I felt my cheeks heat up. I could tell that Sofia was also nervous, the back of her ears growing red and her hands fiddling with themselves in front of her.

Relax, Wes. It's just sunscreen. Totally innocent.

"Right," I whispered to myself, loosing a tight breath. I then began to rub the sunscreen onto Sofia's back. Sofia didn't move as I covered her neck and shoulder blades quickly, not wanting to linger on her skin for longer than

necessary. Everything was going fine, until I reached her mid-back. I carefully slathered the sunscreen onto the little circle of exposed skin there, and flinched when Sofia visibly shivered at my touch. *Shivered* .

Nico makes you shiver.

My hands flung backwards as the thought flew into my mind, the hairs on the back of my neck standing erect.

Feeling that my fingers were no longer touching her, Sofia turned around coyly, a small smile on her face as she looked up at me through thick lashes. Her cheeks were red and her lower lip a little wet, as if she had been nibbling on it.

"Thanks, Wes," Sofia said, her voice low as she stepped towards me. I felt uncomfortable when her brown eyes drifted up to my lips, eyes glassing over.

"No problem!" I choked out, stepping backwards to shove the sunscreen back into Sofia's bag, which was lying atop the beach towel Benny had laid down. Sofia's face dropped in disappointment, but regained its usual relaxed expression when she grabbed my hand.

"Let's swim!" I let Sofia drag me into the water, the girl giggling as she saw Parker awkwardly tumble forwards towards Jamie, who casually side stepped out of the way, leaving Parker to drop into the ocean like a rock. Benny was beside himself laughing, throwing a large wad of seaweed into Parker's face when he re-emerged from the water.

I waded through the water until it reached my hips, sinking my toes into the sad. Sofia was standing beside me, the water up to her belly button. I stiffened as Sofia's hands wrapped around my forearm, her breasts pressing against my bicep.

"Let's go swim over there," Sofia said, a sly smile on her face as she nodded her head towards some secluded rocks on the far side of the short. I glanced at Benny, Jamie and Parker, who were all preoccupied with trying to pile as much seaweed onto the latter as possible and weren't paying any attention

to the two of us. Seeming to hear my thoughts, Sofia pressed herself a bit closed, her hair tickling my skin. "They won't notice if we slip away?"

I didn't have the heart to tell her no, and soon we wound ourselves wading down towards the rocks. Sofia effortlessly floated a little further out from the sand, while I stayed close to the short and dragged my feet through the water. When we rounded the stones, cut off from the view of other beachgoers, Sofia latched onto my shoulders, our pelvis's bumping as we struggled to stay afloat. I gulped as water sloshes at my chin, my feet dragging the two of us into more shallow waters - and within view of others. Sofia frowned, looking up at me through misty eyes.

"Sorry, I'm, um, not a good swimmer," I lied, Sofia's face softening as she nodded, the hand resting at the back of my head stroking its fingers through my damp hair. "Can we just stay near the shore?"

"Sure," Sofia said, nodding, the two of us crawling to sit on some rocks. I made minute movements to try and shy myself away from Sofia's though, though she kept her arm snaked around mine, her head on my shoulder. The two of us sat there on the rocks for a while longer, Sofia's face blissfully peaceful, while mine struggled to hide the discomfort that drew itself there. As Sofia snuggled into my side, her warmth pressed against me, I couldn't help but wish that the heat I felt was from someone else.

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"You two could stay here!" mum chirped as she gathered the plates. Benny nodded in agreement as he licked the meat juices off his thumb after our backyard barbecue, Jamie trying not to burst out laughing at Parker's ecstatic face, his eyes trained on her. Sofia just blushed and cast me careful glances while she fiddled with the hem of her sundress, Benny noticing and giving me a not-so-subtle elbow to the side. I kept my face neutral as mum continued to try and persuade Parker and Sofia, but by the looks on their faces, I could tell that they were already completely swayed.

"I guess you guys didn't pack for an overnight trip though?" Jamie asked, Parker shaking his head. I could almost see his tail wagging as Jamie
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acknowledged his words, nodding thoughtfully. "Well, we could go to the supermarket to get you guys toothbrushes."

"And Parker, you can borrow some of my clothes to sleep in if you want," Benny offered, before giving me a look, his lips quirked to the side. I glared at Benny as his smirk deepened, Jamie obviously clued in as she chuckled. "Wes could let Sofia borrow one of his shirts to sleep in too. *Right, Wes* ?"

No.

"Yeah, sure, no problem," I said, head lowered as Sofia's face began to glow bright red, starting from her cheeks all the way to the tips of her ears.

"Then it's settled then!" mum said happily, nudging me to get moving. "Jamie can drive you kids down to the supermarket and grab the things you need while I clean up here."

"Are you sure, Mrs. Dillon?" Sofia asked, frowning as mum wobbled under the weight of the plates. My mum just laughed, nodding towards the door with a friendly smile.

"I'm fine, honey," mum said, Sofia smiling sweetly, before the group of us walked out. The five of us piled into Jamie's car, Parker riding shotgun (in a mildly embarrassing bid to sit next to Jamie), while Sofia, Benny and I were crammed into the back of her tiny car. I sighed as I kicked away an empty water bottle that skittered across the floor, my arms pressed uncomfortably tightly against Sofia, who was sandwiched between Benny and I. I noticed that Sofia was sitting a little closer to my side, giving Benny more space and me... more anxiety.

Luckily, the supermarket was close to our rented beach house, and soon we were tumbling out of the car after Jamie haphazardly parallel parked between two large trucks. The supermarket, which was small compared to the ones in the city but still stocked all the basic necessities, was quiet. The only other people here, apart from the workers clad in bright green uniforms, were couple in the toiletries section trying to decide what condoms they wanted.

"You guys go grab your toothbrushes and whatever, I'm getting snacks," Jamie said, already walking towards the chips and crackers aisle. Parker looked at her back longingly, Benny just shaking his head with a pitiful smile on his face.

"Good luck, my friend," Benny said, patting Parker's back solemnly. "I pray for the day Jamie actually sees you as boyfriend material."

"Oooo-kay, can we not talk about my sister like that," I said, shivering as I faux-gagged. Sofia laughed as Benny just pat Parker's head again, the other boy whining. "And just you wait until you see Jamie in her 'at-home' mode. She'll scare you right off." Benny nodded, eyes going a little distance as he pictured Jamie's slouchy appearance, giving Parker an apologetic look.

"Yeah, man, she looks like this now, but give her an hour and you'll be in for a scare. That's some Paranormal Activity shit," Benny said, Parker frowning.

"If you guys are trying to turn me off it's not working. Wes, your sister is fucking hot," Parker said, and I gagged for real this time.

"Yep, I'm just going to erase that from my memory now," I sighed, pushing my glasses up to pinch my nose bridge. Sofia just giggled, shaking her head at her friend, before gripping my forearm to gently guide me to the toothbrush section. She quickly grabbed two of the cheapest manual toothbrushes and some toothpaste, passing one to Parker.

I knew that my sister had returned with her snacks when Parker shrugged Benny's arm off him, straightening his back and plastering an incredibly over-done smile on his face. Sofia, Benny and I just looked at each other as he smoothed down his hair, Jamie not even looking at him as she excitedly waved two large bag of chips in her hands.

"They were half price," Jamie said, face beaming as she recounted the sales she found.

"Oooh, sweet chilli," Benny said, licking his lips. "Good choice."

"I am a woman of fine tastes," Jamie said, curtseying. Benny laughed while Parker ogled at her, swallowing thickly. Sofia caught my grimace at Parker's obvious crush on my sister, urging us to head back home since it was getting a little late. The five of us paid for our things - Jamie stubbornly forcing Parker and Sofia to let her pay for their toothbrushes, despite their (mainly Sofia's) reluctance - and left the supermarket.

When we got home, my mother was already in her pyjamas and ready for bed, wishing us a good night. She looked a little tired, though relaxed, and I realised that her body hadn't adjusted to the normal waking hours after working the night shift at the hospital for so long. Mum kissed my cheek before she headed back to her room, leaving it open behind her for Jamie to follow suit, since they were going to share that room tonight. With Sofia and Parker staying with us, Parker was going to stay with Benny in what was once our room (though he took the opportunity to offer to share a bed with Jamie, a proposal that none of us took seriously). Sofia was going to take what had been Jamie's bed, and I offered to crash on the couch for the night. I had no issues with it, since the couch was expansive and there were spare pillows and blankets folded in the closet of the master bedroom.

Parker and Benny soon went into their room to get changed into their pyjamas, leaving Sofia and I in the living room. Sofia's feet tapped on the ground as she gave me a small smile, hopping up onto her toes to give me a hidden kiss on the lips. When she pulled back, I looked towards my room, avoiding her gaze.

"I'll go grab you a shirt to wear," I said, Sofia blushing.

"Okay, thanks, Wes," Sofia said, making me give her a tiny smile and nod. I quickly rushed off into the bedroom, Benny sitting on the bed flicking through his phone and already in his pyjamas, whilst Parker was half undressed and pulling on a pair of Benny's sweatpants. Parker was a little skinny, but his skin was unmarred and pale, his muscles defined on his slender physique. I stared at him for a brief moment, not because I couldn't tear my eyes away from his form, but because I was trying to see if seeing him in a state of undress would make me *feel* anything.

It did nothing for me.

He was too slender, his skin a little too pasty and his muscles not robust enough. He didn't have finely sculpted abs and dark tattoos scattered across his rippling arm muscles. He didn't have jet black hair and sea-blue eyes, or a lip ring that reflected the light.

He wasn't Nico.

"You okay, Wes?" Benny asked, glancing up at me from his phone. I gulped but nodded, rummaging through my packed luggage for the largest shirt I had to give to Sofia. I pulled out one of the shirts I was going to wear as pyjamas, the large expanse of fabric heavy but soft in my hands. The T-shirt was old and had an embarrassing print of an elephant on it, but it would have to do.

"Oh, yeah, go put some clothes on your girl," Benny said, snickering as Parker winked.

"She's not my-" I started, groaning in frustration as the two of them only began to tease me further. "I hate you guys."

"But you love Sofia!" Benny called after me, making my head throb.

Sofia must have heard Benny's loud voice through the door, because she was staring at me as I walked out, her hands pressed against her cherry-coloured cheeks.

"Uh, here's a shirt. It's a bit old, but it's clean, don't worry," I said lamely, rubbing the back of my neck as Sofia took it gingerly, as if it were a designer garment.

"It's cute," Sofia said, holding it up to her body. "Didn't you know that elephants are *so* in his season?" Sofia gave me a cheeky grin, making me laugh earnestly.

"Clearly fashion isn't my strong suit," I said, Sofia giggling. "Anyway, I'm probably going to get changed."

"Yeah, same," Sofia said, the two of us heading off to separate rooms to get changed into. After everyone was changed into their pyjamas, we reconvened in the lounge room. Sofia was shy as she emerged from the bathroom, tugging at the hem of my T-shirt, which managed to cover most of her thighs. Although I wasn't particularly large in stature, the T-shirt managed to swamp her petite frame. Her hair was down, framing her face innocently, making her look younger than usual.

"I'm glad it fits," was all I could tell her, Sofia blushing a little at my words, nodding silently.

"Oh my god," Parker suddenly burst out, all of our heads following his gaze. Benny and I were unfazed as we saw Jamie walk out of her and mum's room, face covered in green goo and hair in a terribly unruly bun at the top of her head. Her mouth was chewing chips at a rapid pace, dropping some crumbs onto the front of her pyjamas, which was honestly just an old T-shirt and some fraying sweatpants.

"And the Hulk appears," Benny said, Jamie flipping him off after popping another chip into her mouth.

Parker then turned to me, eyes starry as he grinned. I gave him a questioning look, Benny also curious at his reaction.

"She's adorable," Parker said quietly so Jamie couldn't hear, both Benny and I sucking in surprised breaths.

" *That* is cute?" Benny whispered loudly, Jamie's head flicking upwards. Getting the gist of the conversation, Jamie walked up behind Benny to give him a slap on the back of his head, Benny hissing. "See? Totally not cute!"

"Oh, don't be shy, Benny. You love getting hit," Jamie cooed, ruffling his hair. Benny just muttered something under his breath while Parker trailed after Jamie like an awe-struck puppy.

After a little more teasing, the five of us piled onto the L-shaped couch to watch a movie, Sofia and Jamie both nodding off towards the end of it. After the credits rolled, Parker helped the sleeping Sofia hobble off to bed

after a sleepy goodnight, while Benny all but shoved a snoring Jamie into her room. Benny and Parker soon went into their room, leaving me alone on the couch under a thin blanket, unable to sleep.

I rolled onto my side and shuffled backwards until my back hit the couch's backrest, tugging my pillow under my head. Looking at my phone, I was surprised to see that I had a missed call.

I must have missed it during the movie.

My heart hammered as I checked my call log, a smile breaking out onto my face as adrenaline slapped away any thought of sleep from my mind. I quickly called the number back as I stood up, dragging the blanket with me before stepping outside onto the back porch. Seating myself into the hammock, I pressed the phone to my ear, the dial tone making me grow impatient. There was a click, and then a rough voice tickling my ear.

"Took you a while to call me back, Wes." I smiled at his voice, closing my eyes to savour it before speaking.

"Sorry, Nico."

A/N: If Jamie isn't me when I'm in my pyjamas I don't know who is lol. I relate to her hermit attire at a spiritual level.

TWENTY-FOUR

"Can't sleep again?" Nico asked, making me sigh.

"I guess. Sofia and Parker joined us," I said, leaving the words hanging there as I rocked in the hammock, waiting for Nico's response. He didn't give me one, silence greeting me. I could just hear his breath through the phone, the sound so quiet I had to close my eyes to focus on it. I didn't realise that I had been holding my breath until I released it when Nico finally replied.

"Did you sleep with her?" Nico asked, and I almost flipped over in the hammock. Nico must have heard my startled yelp as I fumbled with my phone, gripping the stable banister of the hammock to steady myself.

"What?" I spluttered, Nico still silent across the line. " *No!* Of course I didn't! Why would you say that?" I frowned, the idea of me sleeping with Sofia a nightmarish image in my head. Nico's words made me imagine myself above her, under her, *inside* her. It made me feel sick. And the fact that Nico was the one asking me about it made me feel even more unsettled, almost panicked.

"She still likes you," Nico said simply, and I bit my lips as I heard him pull the car over and turn the radio down.

"You're driving and talking again," I said, both concerned and trying to steer the conversation away from Sofia and all the discomfort that she brought with her. I could hear Nico pick up on my far-from-subtle diversion when he let out a slightly displeased sigh, but I was grateful that he went with it any way, probably too tired to walk this path so late in the night.

"Gotta get home from work somehow, Wes," Nico said, the sound of a smile in his voice. I found myself grinning despite myself, Nico somehow always finding a way to tug and pull at my mood with ease.

"How was work?" I asked, rolling over onto my side as the hammock swung. One hand pressed my phone to my ear while the other picked at a fraying twist of hammock cord. My blanket was pooled over my legs, my torso enjoying the cool breeze that lapped at it comfortingly.

"Work was work," Nico said, though I heard him sigh again. There was a squeak, and I imaged him reclining the chair of his car, window slightly open to allow the breeze to waft through. It made me smile to think that we were sharing the same breeze, even though we were so far away from each other.

"You sound tired," I said gently, Nico grunting in response. "We should hang up so you can get home." I bit my lip as I waited for Nico's response. Despite my words, I wanted to keep talking to him about mundane things, to hear his voice through the receiver and imagine his face as he spoke into my ear.

"Mmhm," Nico hummed, agreeing with me. My smile dropped at this, my mouth opening to say a swift goodnight. My voice was snuffed out when Nico spoke quickly.

"But not yet," Nico said. "I want to talk to you for a bit longer." My chest ached and my stomach fluttered. For some reason a blush crept onto my cheeks, making me pull the blanket up from my legs to smother my face. I coughed to clear my throat before replying to him.

"As long as you're not driving," I said, voice teasingly stern, Nico snorting in response.

"Yeah, okay, *mum* ," Nico said, and I could just see his eye roll in my mind's eye. I huffed, rolling over to my other side, the hammock swaying.

"Shut up, Nico," I said, though the words had no bite to them.

"You hang up then," Nico replied, the smile returning to his words. I stayed silent, making Nico chuckle. "Can't hang up? You like my voice *that* much, Wes?"

I do.

"The heck are you talking about," I scoffed, cheeks heating. "Arrogant prick."

"Don't lie to me, Wes," Nico said, voice dropping. The way he said it sent shivers down my spine, his words referring to more than just me liking his voice.

It was as if he was telling me not to lie about me liking *him* .

I like Nico Beckett.

The thought came to me so easily in that moment that I stopped breathing. The phone line was silent as the words echoed in my head, bouncing around my cranium like an unruly ping pong ball that kept darting out of reach.

I like Nico Beckett.

Like him.

Like. Him.

"I'm hanging up," I said abruptly, Nico just chuckling softly.

"Mhmm. Good night, Wes," Nico said, his voice dragging as he toyed with me knowingly. I didn't say anything before shutting off the call, shoving my phone away from my ear as I stared off into the distance, trying to shut down those words that yelled in my head.

I really do like Nico Beckett.

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Since checkout was early, the group of us had woken up at an ungodly hour of the day to quickly pack our things and dump our bodies into the car to head back home. Parker and Sofia had left a little before us in Parker's car, Sofia giving me a quick kiss on the cheek before sliding into the passenger seat. Now, Jamie, Benny, mum and I were in our own car, the quiet drone of
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mum's terrible 80's radio mumbling in the background the only sound apart from an occasional snore from the back seat.

Mum laughed silently as she glanced at the rearview mirror to look at Benny and Jamie who were dead asleep in the back. Benny's head was pressed tightly against the window, his cheek compressing in a strange flesh-coloured pancake on the glass, while Jamie's head was tilted backwards with her mouth wide open and her eyes scarily open into unconscious slits, little slivers of white showing. I sighed as I saw a little drool collect at the corner of her mouth, mum just shaking her head with a smile on her face.

"Never a morning person, your sister," mum commented, making me nod in response.

"Benny isn't any better," I said, grinning at my best friend, who mumbled in his sleep, his cheek squeaking against the window.

"And that's why I have *you* navigating for me," mum said, reaching across the centre console to tap my arm affectionately. "And since those two are asleep, want to tell me about you and Sofia?"

I choked on my own tongue as I whirled around to look at my mum, eyes wide.

"W-what about me and Sofia?" I asked, gulping. As we pulled up to a red light, mum turned her head to give me an unamused look. " *Mum*, we're just friends."

"Sure, Wes," mum said, rolling her eyes. "Honey, I don't think a girl looks at a guy like *that* and considers him just a friend."

"Mum, what are you on about?" I asked, tapping my foot on the carpeted car mat in discomfort.

"You guys are cute together!" she exclaimed, grinning as the light turned green. "If you ask her out, she'll definitely say yes. It would be nice for you to have a lovely girlfriend like Sofia!"

Girlfriend.

Girl friend.

The word made me queasy, and I forced my head to look out the window, the colours of the trees swirling together into muck.

"Mum, I'm not..." I started, mouth tight as I had to push the words out from my throat. "It's not like that with her."

Not like it is with Nico.

Mum's eyes flickered back to the rearview mirror as she felt Jamie stir. Jamie opened her eyes and yawned with unlady-like finesse, wiping away her drool with the back of her hand. Turning to be briefly, mum pat my arm again.

"I'll drop it for now, Wes," mum said, the amused smile still on her face. "But I still think you two would make a nice couple."

" *Mum* ," I strained again, pressing my palms against my ears to stop her from talking. I ignored her muffled laughter as I trained my eyes back outside the window in the suddenly suffocating car, wishing that I could be somewhere else.

Like a house surrounded by a rainbow of flowers in sheets that smelled a little like nicotine.

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"I'm going to have a nap," Jamie announced as we arrived home after dropping Benny off at his own place. Mum and I gave her incredulous looks, Jamie ignoring them as she sauntered up the stairs despite having slept the entire car trip back home.

"Does she do anything but sleep?" mum sighed, shaking her head as she gently placed her bags near the front entrance.

"Nope," I replied, giving mum a hand with some of the heavier bags.
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"Thanks, honey," mum said, giving me a squeeze on the shoulder. I frowned a little at the bags under her eyes and the slightly strained smile she gave me, which was different from the one in the car that was bubbly and carefree. It was as if the holiday glow around her had immediately dissipated once she stepped into the house. It was probably because she was the one who drove us home and was just tired after the significant drive.

The afternoon went on quite drearily; I showered, had an afternoon snack, and dragged Jamie out of bed for dinner. Soon enough, the rest of the day had slipped through my fingers, leaving my lying on my bed lazily. Jamie had retreated back to her room to start some university assignments that were apparently due in less than two days, and mum had retired early after the long day. The house was quiet as I lay there, somewhat on edge though I didn't know why. I felt antsy, my fingers tapping on my thigh as I continuously shifted my position, unable to get comfortable. It was like an itch that I couldn't quite scratch, and it was driving me insane.

"What the hell is wrong with me," I sighed, rolling over onto my stomach. Hugging my pillow beneath me, I closed my eyes and tried to will myself to calm. As my arms wrapped around the pillow, head buried in my sheets, the pillow beneath me momentarily flashed in the image of Nico, and I gasped, startled.

Swallowing, I clutched the pillow a little tighter, the feathers giving way too much for my liking. The pillow wasn't what I wanted to be hugging right now, the smooth pillow case not what I wanted to be feeling. The itch flared and I rubbed at my eyes harshly until I saw white spots.

I knew, deep down, the cause of that itch. Late night phone calls had been enough for the past two days. But now Monday was tapering off into Tuesday, and a phone call wasn't enough to sustain me. It had only been three days since I last saw Nico, but it had been a long time since I had gone that long without seeing him. Touching him. Kissing him.

I *missed* him.

Because of it, a long weekend has never felt so long before.

Steeling my rattled nerves, I quietly pulled on my shoes and a jacket, and silently slipped out of the house. It did not take me long to reach Nico's flower-covered house, and even less time to jam my finger into the doorbell. My breathing was loud as the bell chimed behind the door, the sound followed by heavy footsteps that approached. Closer. Closer.

Stop.

I inhaled when the lock mechanism clicked. I exhaled when the doorknob turned.

I lost my breath when Nico opened the door.

"Wes?" Nico asked, genuine surprise on his face. I didn't say anything as I stepped forward, heart hammering, and desperately kissed him.

A/N: Finally giving my boy some honest courage :')

TWENTY-FIVE

A/N: Sexy times full steam ahead ;)

"Wes?" Nico asked, face drawn into a picture of shock as I flung myself into his arms. He began to say something else, but I clamped my hands around his neck and kissed him, deeply and hungrily. Nico froze with my sudden boldness, his hands hovering in the air.

Nico's shock did not last long, his throat releasing a primal groan as he pulled me into the house. His hands were rough and ran over my body feverishly, slipping under the hem of my shirt. I echoed his throaty noise when his hands began to pinch and rub the skin at the small of my back, dangerously close to the waistband of my jeans. I let out a pained grunt as Nico pushed me backwards into the door, his hand removing itself from my body to fiddle with the lock. There was a loud click as the mechanism slid into place, Nico pulling back to search my face, expression unreadable. Leaning my head back on the door, I met Nico's gaze completely.

"I missed you too," Nico said after a few laboured breaths, giving a short laugh at his statement as soon as they left his lips. "And you *definitely* missed me."

"Oh? What gave it away?" I asked playfully, neck craning to nudge Nico's lip ring with my lips. Nico growled, making me smile as I pulled back. I shivered as Nico's hungry gaze bore into me, my toes curling expectantly. "Was it this?" I rose upwards again to kiss the angle of his jaw. I grinned as I felt Nico's jaw clench as his hand tightened around my waist, pulling my hips closer. "Or this?" I murmured against his skin, mouth moving down to his neck, nibbling teasingly. "Maybe... this?" I gently sucked at the base of his throat, which bobbed when he swallowed.

"All of it," Nico said, his hand gripping my chin to force my head upwards, kissing me deeply like a starved man. I moaned into his mouth as I felt his hands slide down the dip of my back to cup my ass.

"Is Bell..." I started, unlinking our mouths to look around the house's foyer. Nico just snorted, pinching my ass with a little annoyance at the loss of contact of our lips.

"Out," Nico said, a minute smirk on his mouth. "All night." Nico looked at me briefly, eyes narrowing as he tried to gauge my reaction. His eyes as the corners of my mouth lifted, arms sliding around his neck.

"Good."

Nico took my word as he hoisted me upwards, his strong arms supporting my weight by holding tightly onto my ass. Slinging my legs around his middle, ankles locking, I laughed as he began to walk the two of us upstairs, the sound cut off as Nico smothered me in another heated kiss. Our tongues rolled against each other's, and I couldn't seem to get close enough to Nico's body. My hands began to pull at the back of his shirt, sliding the material upwards to expose his lower back. I could feel Nico smiling as he backed through the door of his bedroom, which closed as he kicked it.

Before Nico dropped me onto his soft mattress, I managed to pull his shirt over his head, throwing the impeding fabric onto the floor. I almost drooled as Nico crawled onto the bed on top of me, my hands running along his bare, rippled chest. His tattoos rippled as I pulled and pushed at his skin. His body was hard and smooth, and nothing at all like Sofia's. Touching his body like this was so easy, and felt so right. Every time my finger would dip into a taut notch in his abdominals made me only hungrier.

No matter how much I touched him, it would never be enough.

"My turn," Nico said, pulling me up until I was basically sitting in his lap on the bed, legs splayed around his torso. His hands swiftly pulled my shirt over my head, throwing on top of his own on the ground. I swallowed back my groan as Nico licked his lips as his eyes blazed a trail down my body. After discarding my shirt, he tenderly trapped my face in his large hands, the rough pads of his thumbs running across my mouth. I smiled sultrily, eyes half closing as I parted my lips, Nico's thumb slipping inside. I swirled my tongue around his digit, Nico biting his lip as he bit back a groan as I sucked. I almost chuckled around his finger as I felt his hardened need

pressing against the inside of my thigh. I rolled my hips slightly, thigh brushing against his member, Nico unable to suppress the guttural sound that rolled from his throat. Its vibrations sent shockwaves through me, filling me with boldness and confidence that I hadn't had before.

Bolstering my nerves, I pushed Nico's chest backwards, physically commanding him to recline. Nico raised a brow, but didn't fight me, and leaned back on his elbows. His blue eyes watched me with both curiosity and lust as I crawled above him, kissing his neck. Nico let out a tight breath as my mouth trailed down his chest, his stomach, the waistband of his jeans. I bit down on the fabric of his jeans, Nico looking at me intensely. His eyes did not wander as I fit the zipper between my incisors and tugged it downwards, Nico swallowing thickly. When I placed a small, tantalising kiss on the bulge growing beneath his underwear, Nico softly pushed on my shoulders, his brow creased.

"You don't have to, Wes," Nico said, his voice husky and so, so soft. I took a second to look at Nico - *really* look at him. His usual smirk was gone and all I could see was his desire and concern. Both for me.

And now I wanted to do something for him.

"I want to," I whispered, Nico stroking my cheek, a silent question. I kissed the palm of his hand there in response, Nico nodding. His muscular body shivered as I shimmied his underwear and jeans down, his erection springing free from its confines. I licked my lips as the head of his dick was slick with pre-cum. Nico's hand in my hair, both comforting and electrifying, gave me the confidence to move. My tongue flicked outwards, lapping at the underside of his dick, Nico throwing his head back with a moan. Running my tongue from his balls to his head, I finally wrapped my mouth around his length, Nico's fingers clawing. He tasted bitter.

"Fuck, Wes," Nico breathed, eyes closed as he leaned back. I hollowed my cheeks and bobbed my head, trying not to choke as Nico couldn't help but buck his hips a little, the movement jerky as he tried not to do so, clearly trying not to overwhelm me. The way he fisted the sheets in his hand and bit his lip as he tried to restrain himself made my heart swell, and the desire to pleasure Nico only grew.

My hands helped fill the free spaces along the length of his penis as I sucked, his erection growing inside my mouth. Nico murmured obscenities between hitched breaths, his stomach tightening whenever my head lowered around him.

"Fuck, Wes, I can't," Nico grunted, his hips thrusting forward, making me choke. The sudden movement made tears spring to my eyes as I coughed, Nico pulling out of my mouth with a slick pop. A little saliva dribbled from my mouth as I coughed, Nico wiping it away as I looked up at him, embarrassed. Nico didn't seem to notice my embarrassment as he looked at me, worried. Sitting up, he gently pulled me close by the waist.

"Sorry," Nico said, kissing my throat. "I couldn't control myself." I blushed at Nico's words, my momentary gag reflex subsiding as he spoke against my throat.

"So you didn't stop me because I was, um, bad?" I asked, eyes looking downwards as the doubt began creeping in. Nico chuckled against my Adam's apple, before pulling back to give me a smouldering look, his ice blue eyes melting me.

"Do you think I'd be like *this* if you were bad?" Nico asked, gesturing down at his throbbing member. I blushed ten shades redder as I looked down at his penis, still glossy with my saliva. The full extent of what I had just done hit me all at once, and I just looked between Nico's face and his dick with my mouth hanging open, face growing hotter and hotter. Nico laughed at my reaction, taking my momentary shock to push me down against the mattress.

Oh my fucking god I just gave Nico Beckett a blow job.

And it was good.

Fuck.

I squeaked as Nico grinned, reaching downwards to slip his hand inside my pants. I gave him a wide-eyed stare as his fingers tugged at my dick while simultaneously pushing my pants down over my ass. My muscles flexed as

he rubbed me, kissing my neck as he did so. Nico's movements were slow and purposeful, his thumb rubbing across the top of my dick in tantalising circles. I bit my lip as pleasure burst up towards my abdomen, my hands digging in to Nico's bicep as I desperately tried to find something to hold on to. Nico's sheets were balled up in my hand as I writhed into Nico's own, the boy smiling against my skin as he nibbled.

"Nico..." I moaned, the boy above me growling at his name.

"Say it again," Nico said roughly, biting me a little harder. My hips bucked as his teeth sunk into me, toes curling.

" *Nico,* " I gasped, eyes shut tightly as everything began to go white.

"Again," Nico commanded, his voice low and commanding, his teeth now moving down to my shoulder where he bit down again.

" *Nico,* " I managed to get out between groans. Nico grunted, satisfied.

"Nico, I want you..." I began, words interrupted as Nico squeezed around my dick a little tighter, sucking my thoughts out of me. "Nico, I need you *now* . Please." My voice was just a needy, desperate breath. I let out a frustrated noise as Nico's hands didn't move *there* fast enough, making me pull his hand off my dick and guiding it further and further back to my ass. Nico grinned at my eagerness, eyes alight as my mouth fell open in a silent, raptured cry as his finger slipped into my entrance. I could feel my muscles contracting and my skin puckering around his finger, which thrust in and out rhythmically.

I let out a cry as Nico inserted another finger, his unoccupied hand reaching across the bed to his drawers to pull out some lube. Popping open the cap with his teeth, Nico poured the slippery fluid across my asshole, my body twitching at the sudden cold stimuli that slid across my skin.

"Nico, please," I pleaded, pulling my torso upwards to kissing him. Nico returned my kiss fully as he shifted his lower body, lining his hardened penis up with my pulsing asshole. "Please, please, please, please, *please* ," I chanted against his mouth, our breaths mingling as Nico groaned, the tip of

his penis teasing my entrance. When Nico finally pushed in, his cock sliding into me to the base, I fell back against the sheets with a cry.

While the other time we had done this things had been clouded by drink, this time I was completely and utterly sober, and felt every single minute movement of Nico's. This time was so, so, so much better, and I felt myself losing all thought as he thrust in and out of me. The loud slaps of our skin smacking against each other echoed against the walls, and the wet noises made the both of us only grow with need.

"Wes, you're so..." Nico groaned, unable to find the words as his hips moved, faster and more erratically as he began to climb his climax.

"Nico, I can't... I'm going to... Oh my god," I moaned, my entire body tensing as my stomach swelled. Everything felt like it was on fire as I felt my orgasm begin to take hold of me.

"Cum for me, Wes," Nico said, taking my bottom lip between his as I cried out. The knot in my stomach unfurled at his words, my seed spraying across my stomach as I came. Nico groaned into my mouth as I shook, his thrusts unravelling into disarray as he too came inside me. Nico collapsed on top of me, sweaty and hot, his face resting in the curve of my neck. I felt his dick slide out of me, leaving me feeling a little empty. The momentary emptiness soon disappeared when Nico rolled off me to pull me into a tight embrace, our faces level. Nico looked down at me through bright blue eyes, his dark hair damp and falling across his face in exertion. His lips were a little swollen and a few dark bruises were beginning to form on his neck, courtesy of me.

He looked positively glorious, even more so when he smiled, kissing my forehead softly. Though chaste, the small kiss was no less passionate than the many we had shared just moments ago, and sent shivers running through me. My heart was beating so loudly, I had no doubt that Nico could feel it at the point where out chests touched.

"So," Nico asked, fingers trailing lines down my back, his head resting on his bicep. I found myself smiling at the satisfied, relaxed expression on his features, snuggling into him.

"So," I repeated, tangling my legs in his.

"That wasn't too bad," Nico said, smirking. "Even better than last time."

"I guess so. I was so drunk I can barely remember last time," I said, grinning playfully as Nico snorted.

"We both know that you remember everything, Wes," Nico said. Leaning his forehead against mine, Nico sighed. "You don't... regret this again, do you?" Nico's eyes searched mine, the hand stroking my back stopping its movements.

Did I?

God knows I definitely regretted the first time we had slept together in his sheets. But this time... This time...

"No," I whispered, Nico's hand moving again as he nodded, his mouth curling happily. Kissing me deeply, my heart stopped as Nico spoke, his words as sure and steady.

"Neither do I."

A/N: Honestly, writing sex scenes is so hard because my thesaurus doesn't have 234093042 ways to say penis. Like seriously. I mean, 'man sausage' is a very apt description but hardly sexy. At least not to me. Maybe to someone else though, there are all kinds of people lol

Hope you enjoyed this chapter though folks ;)

TWENTY-SIX

"It's a familiar warmth."

I smiled as I snuggled closer to the warmth pressing against my back, enjoying the way the arms locked around my waist tightened with my movement. A nose nuzzled the back of my head and a gruff, sleep-wracked voice grumbled, making me chuckle softly. Instead of throwing Nico's arms off, I simply rested my own across his, fingers lacing with his as they rested by my slightly exposed belly button. I blushed a little as I daringly pressed my feet against Nico's warm shin, wanting to feel more of his skin against mine. I was nervous that he might kick me away, but when I felt him smile against the back of my head and sling his thigh over mine, I let out a contented sigh.

"Morning, Nico," I whispered, Nico murmuring his reply and burrowing himself closer to my side, almost pinning me against his mattress. "Nico, you're holding me too tight! You're heavy," I whined, making a feeble, half-hearted attempt to push his body off me. Though I couldn't dislodge myself from his grip, I had enough leeway space to rotate myself so I was facing him, my hands wedged between our chests and fingers flush against his bare chest.

"Not letting you go," Nico said groggily, pulling me impossibly closer until I had to force to relocate my hands from between us to around his waist. "You'll run away again." I laughed at that, pinching his side gently as I buried my face into the curve of his neck, breathing in his heady scent.

"Nico, I have to pee though," I whined again, Nico cracking open his heavy-lidded eyes to peer down at me.

"Is that an excuse to run away?" Nico asked, eyes narrowing. I shook my head adamantly, Nico just humming. "I don't trust you."

"Nico, I'm seriously going to pee in your bed if you don't let me go," I said, trying to maintain a straight face as Nico just grinned. I gasped when he hoisted himself up onto all fours, trapping me beneath him.

"You wouldn't dare," Nico said, leaning down to kiss the side of my mouth. I bit the inside of my cheeks to try and keep the smile off my face, though I could tell Nico noticed the way I quivered when he retracted his lips. I opened my mouth to retort, but Nico just shushed me and trapped my mouth in another kiss, this time square on my lips. I couldn't keep the smile off my face this time, and looped my arms around Nico's neck, pulling him in closer. *Ah, Nico's kisses are really nice.*

"Hm, how daring of you so early in the morning," Nico growled into my mouth, his tongue flicking upwards, a low moan rumbling from my throat. "And loud too," Nico continued, smirking as he kissed me again, tongues tangling. "You'll wake the neighbours."

"Shut up," I murmured, leaning upwards into Nico's touch. Nico didn't even bother replying and simply pulled me up into his chest, heaving the two of us up until I was sitting in his lap. The blankets pooled around our waists, the air a little cold against our bare backs, but I couldn't care since Nico's warmth was enveloping me right to the core.

Our mouths didn't part for a long time that morning, not until they were thoroughly bruised and our chests heaving. When we parted, Nico with his face almost in disbelief, gently brushed his thumb across my swollen lips.

"You're really here," Nico breathed out, blue eyes lighting up as they gazed at me. His fingers were so soft as they cupped my chin, his thumb stroking my cheeks, the touch so uncharacteristically tender that I blushed profusely. "Something's changed, hasn't it?"

"Mm," was all I could say, suddenly embarrassed as everything we did last night and this morning finally caught up to me. Nico must have noticed this and he laughed, his gentle fingers pinching my cheeks tightly, making me yelp.

"But you're still the same. So easily embarrassed. At least you're not punching me this time," Nico said, grinning as I turned a deeper shade of red, pushing against Nico's chest with force. Scuttling away from him, I slid my glasses over my face and glanced above his shoulder at the clock on his desk. I blinked a few times as the red light of the digital clock was still a little blurry with sleep, and almost peed Nico's bed as I saw the time.

"I'm late!" I screeched, tripping out of his bed and hastily collecting my clothes strewn across the room. Nico just watched me in amusement as I tripped over my own feet, cursing frantically.

"This is a familiar sight," Nico commentated, throwing me my pants. "Rushing out of my room again, Wes? What's this, the third time?"

"Not funny," I groaned, flipping him off before gesturing to the bedpost behind him. "Give me my shirt." Nico raised a brow as he grabbed my shirt, dangling it in the air in front of him.

"What? This shirt?" Nico asked, his voice drawn out and teasing. The vein in my forehead throbbed as Nico swung my shirt in lazy circles in front of me, lips turned upwards in a closed smile, eyes twinkling.

"Nico," I almost pleaded, stepping over to try to snatch it from his hands, Nico just holding it out behind him and out of reach. "Nico, seriously, I'm already late for school!"

"Hm? I am being serious," Nico said, wiggling the shirt again. "Just come and get it."

"You're such an asshole," I spat, kneeling on his bed to grab my shirt. Nico just laughed as I reached forward, dropping my shirt onto the ground behind him and pulling me down on top of him with his other hand. " *Nico!* "

" *Wes* ," Nico echoed, his chest moving as he laughed, the sound so light and carefree that I felt my frustration begin to ebb away.

"Nico, don't be an ass," I whined, stretching my arm to retrieve my bullied shirt, Nico still holding me tightly against him.

"Never said I wasn't," Nico said, making me roll my eyes. "I'll let you go if you give me a kiss." Nico wiggled his brow challengingly.

"I hate you," I said, sighing as I pressed a chaste kiss against his cheek, Nico snorting. "Done. Now let me go."

"Okay, okay," Nico said, raising his hands into the air in surrender. Rolling off him and pulling my shirt on, I began to feel queasy as I saw the time ticking over.

"Oh, great," I said sarcastically, calculating how much time I had left to get home and change into my school uniform, and then catch the train to school. Even skipping breakfast meant that at this rate, I was going to be late. Turning to Nico, who had slid back into bed and was watching me with amused, warm eyes, I just sighed.

"I take it you're not going to school?" I said, Nico shrugging.

"If I wake up."

"I guess I'll... see you another day then," I said lamely, Nico just nodding, though his lip ring moved as he smiled. His soft expression made me blush, my stomach flipping. There was still so much unsaid between us, but his kisses and banter had made me forget all of it this morning. After last night, I didn't really know where we stood with each other; were we friends, two people who slept together, or something more? I didn't know, but I was also too afraid to ask.

Afraid that I wouldn't like the answer.

Swallowing thickly, I muttered another goodbye before high-tailing it out of the room. It didn't take me too long to get home, and thankfully Jamie was still dead asleep in her room when I returned. I showered quickly, but spent a good amount of time cleaning out down *there,* and changed into my uniform. Not bothering to smooth down my hair or fill my gurgling stomach, I rushed out the door as quickly as I had burst in, eyes constantly checking my watch.

"Okay, if I run I should be able to make the train," I said to myself, trying to verbally will my hopes into reality. I had reached the first corner, my breath already laboured as I ran, when a car slid up beside me, wheels rolling at the same pace as my feet against the ground.

"Need a lift?"

My feet slowed as I blinked, head turning towards the car. My eyes nearly bugged out as I saw Nico sitting there, the passenger window open as he looked up at me, that infuriating smirk on his mouth.

"Huh?" I blurted out, genuinely confused. "You... what... but you were sleeping?"

"Tried to, but I was... distracted," Nico laughed, leaning over the centre console to open the passenger door. "You coming or not?" Looking at my watch again, the second hand steadily ticking forwards, I gave in and slid into Nico's car. After peeling his car off the sidewalk, I jumped in my seat when Nico's hand grabbed onto mine, resting on the console between us.

"What are you doing?" I asked, glancing at our linked hands and Nico's face, which was looking tentatively at the road. Nico smiled and squeezed my hand.

"Don't like it?" Nico asked, not looking away from the road. I gulped, turning away from him to stare out the window. Instead of pulling my hand away from his, as I would have done any other day, I instead interlaced our fingers, locking them together. Nico squeezed my hand again, my cheeks flaring. The two of us didn't say anything for the rest of the drive to school, but we didn't let go of our hands either.

Soon - too soon - Nico had pulled into school and parked the car. Nico moved and opened his door, his arm tugging on mine as he began to exit. Students were trudging across the carpark, all of their backs solemn after the long-weekend ended and their small reprieve from school disappeared. I gulped when I saw the familiar backs of Sofia and Parker walking in, Sofia glancing around as if looking for someone, a frown evident on her pretty face. I sunk down into Nico's passenger seat, heart dropping.

"Wait," I said, tightening my grip on his hand. Nico's body stopped moving, before he let out a soft laugh and sat back down, closing the door with a click.

"What, Wes?" Nico said. Avoiding his gaze to look out the window, I rested my chin in the palm of my hand, head leaning against the cool glass of the window.

"Can we just... stay like this. For a minute. We're... still early." Nico squeezed my hand again, locking the car doors.

"Sure," Nico said, eyes following the trail of my own. Pausing, he seemed to understand the reason for my hesitation once he saw Sofia, and he just sighed. "Can't stay like this for too long though, Wes."

I smiled bleakly as I nodded, knowing that Nico wasn't talking about staying in the car. Sofia and I... our relationship - if you could call it that - had dragged on for too long, and it was my fault. I knew that I had led her on, tugged her by the sleeve with promises of something more, but I knew that I wouldn't be able to give it to her. Maybe at one stage I sincerely hoped that I could, but now...

Now I knew I couldn't. Not with Nico beside me.

TWENTY-SEVEN

"Do you have to walk next to me?" I whispered under my breath, side-stepping to put some space between Nico and I as we walked across the carpark towards the school buildings. My back continued to fold over as the whispers of students around us grew. Nico just scoffed, stepping towards me again. Standing close enough for our shoulders to bump occasionally, people couldn't mistake the fact that we were walking to school together, and it was that fact that made everyone nudge their friends and cover their mouths with cupped hands as they passed gossip back and forth.

"Hm? Did you say something, Wes?" Nico snickered, leaning in a little to whisper quietly to me.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" I grumbled, stepping away from him again, only for Nico to match my movements, as he had been doing this whole walk towards the doors.

"Thoroughly," Nico grinned, winking. Rolling my eyes, I gave up trying to disengage myself from him, and instead focused on drowning out the whispers of the students that were getting louder and less discreet.

"I can't believe you're not bothered by all of this," I said, wincing as I saw a group of students point at us shamelessly. One of the people in the group slapped the wayward finger, saying that we'll realise that they're talking about us. *Too late, though.*

"You get used to the attention," Nico said casually, shrugging. I just scoffed.

" *Riiiight* , Mr. Popular," I said, making a gagging noise as Nico just laughed. Stepping through the front doors, the staring and whispering only got worse; people were loitering around at their lockers, and as we walked past, their books and bags were forgotten as their eyes widened to saucers, trailing behind us as if they were mopping the ground we walked on with their gazes.

" *What the fuck?!* " a shrill, ear-grating voice shrieked from across the hall. Nico's face immediately became a little annoyed at the sharp noise, and I immediately knew why. Alyssa. Her and her posse were standing slack-jawed by her locker, her skirt still impossibly short and her cleavage as robust as ever. Her eyes were darting between the two of us enough to make her cross-eyed, and her lacquered finger was shaking in the air as she pointed towards us. Turning towards her as Nico and I walked past, eyes locking, I couldn't help but smirk as she glared. I felt a sudden surge of satisfaction flare within me as Alyssa's mouth bobbed up and down, Nico not even sparing her a glance as he looked at me when we reached my locker. Leaning against the wall beside me as I rummaged through my locker, passing Nico some of my books to hold as I made sure to grab everything, Alyssa's heated gaze at my back was palpable, but not uncomfortable. In fact...

It felt good.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" Nico said, mimicking the words I had spoken to him moments before, making me bat my lashes sweetly at him, feigning innocence.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said, Nico just shaking his head with a smile on his face.

"Heeeey, Wes-oo-lee, long time no- *ohmyfuckinggod.* "

"Hey, morning Benny," I said, recognising his voice beside me. I didn't turn to him as I closed my locker, taking my books from Nico's waiting hands. "Thanks, Nico."

"Sure," Nico said, glancing towards Benny. Nodding his head, Nico greeted him briefly. "Hey."

"H-Hey," Benny squeaked, and I heard Nico snort at Benny's reaction to him. I gave Nico a harsh look, kicking his shin lightly. Before I could chastise Nico, the bell rang, and Nico took that as his cue to leave.

"I'll see you in bio," Nico said, plunging his hand in his pocket to pull out a cigarette.

"You're not going to class?" I asked, already knowing his answer. Nico shook his head as he placed the smoke between his lips, ruffling my hair briefly. I slapped his hand away, Nico's laugh disappearing along with him as he left the school building. When the doors behind him closed, it was as if the whole hallway suddenly began moving, everyone finally taking their eyes away from the two of us, though people still gave me wary, confused or shocked glances as they stumbled past.

"Wes, what the hell was that?!" Benny gasped, gripping onto my arm tightly.

"Hm? What was what?" I said, faking ignorance.

"Nico-fucking-Beckett, obviously!" Benny all but yelled, making the students around us stop and lean in, eyes and ears trying to suck out any piece of information as they could.

"Oh, we're bio partners, I thought I told you?" I said, almost choking on my suppressed laughter as Benny's face grew more desperate. "Anyway, gotta get to class. See you at lunch!"

"Wes, you can't leave me like this!" Benny cried out. "Wes! Wesley! Hey!"

"Bye, Benny," I laughed, waving my hand behind me as I made my way to class.

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"Hey guys," I chirped happily, plopping myself next to Benny at our usual lunch table, everyone immediately dropping whatever they were focused on to stare at me. "I didn't have time to pack lunch this morning, I had forgotten how brutal the lunch line is." The table was still silent as I opened the plastic container of pasta, stabbing into it with a plastic fork and taking a generous bite. "Ugh, bland." Swallowing, I looked up to see everyone still staring at me with serious expressions on their faces. Rachel was seated on
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the same side of the table as me, and she had closed the study notes she had been perusing to stare at me, questions swirling behind her glasses. Leo, sitting opposite Rachel, had stopped devouring his large container of chicken and broccoli, the morsel on his fork slipping off the prongs as he looked me up and down. Parker was sitting next to him, and his eyes were sparkling with intrigue. Sofia, sitting directly opposite me, had a concerned frown etched into her mouth, her fingers fiddling with the ribbon tying together the ends of her long braid.

"What?" I asked after swallowing my mouthful.

"You tell us," Parker said, wiggling a brow. "I heard that Nico made you his slave, and that he forced you to follow him around all morning, buying him cigarettes and stuff."

"Nah, I heard that Wes got initiated into his gang or something, and that Nico was showing him the ropes," Leo piped up, Sofia's face blanching.

"Uh... but Jessie from chem told me that Wes was being forced to do Nico's homework for him, since he's failing almost every subject," Rachel said, and I let out an amused snort. *He is failing almost everything, that's not a lie.*

"He said 'hey' to me this morning," Benny suddenly said, body shaking. "Is that some sort of codeword for ' *Hey,* I'm going to kill you later' or something? Oh my god, he's going to kill me, isn't he."

"No one's killing anyone, Benny," I said, patting him on the back. "And you guys need to stop believing all those rumours, they're ridiculous. Uh, well, except for the stuff about him failing. I guess that's kind of true."

"But he said ' *hey* ' to me, Wes!" Benny choked out, shaking my shoulders. "H-E-Y. And he said he'll 'see you in bio'. Wes, he's going to fucking kill you. What did you do to him?"

"Um... I submitted our bio project?" I offered, everyone groaning at my lacklustre response.

"But why did you come to school together?" Rachel asked, Benny turning to her with wide eyes, before turning to me, expecting a response. Scratching my neck, I shrugged.

"He gave me a lift this morning," I said simply, and Benny toppled backwards, pretending to faint.

"Oh my god he really did initiate you into his gang," Parker said, whistling.

"What gang?" I snorted, waving away the notion with my hand. "We're just friends, guys, seriously."

Yeah, friends that fucked each other last night.

"Friends?" Sofia said quietly, the frown on her face deepening. This was the first word she had said since I arrived at the table, making me look up from my food. Her voice was grave, and laced with worry. "There's no way you could be friends with someone like *that* ."

" *Someone like that?* " I repeated, the hairs on the back of neck bristling at Sofia's biting words. "What do you mean by that, Sof?"

"Wes, it's obvious he's just using you to boost his grades," Sofia said, her voice icy as her nose crinkled, like she smelled something bad. "He's violent, and a drug addict! He doesn't take study seriously, and just uses other people to scrape through. People like you, who are too nice to realise they're just being used! And not to mention, he sleeps with every living thing on the planet, who knows what diseases he has! He's just a degenerate, and someone that shouldn't be hanging around you. Hey, you should let the teachers know what he's doing to you, Wes. They could suspend him or something!" Sofia's face brightened at her idea, her skinny arm reaching across the table to cradle my wrist. "Actually, why don't we go to see Principal Myers right no-"

"What the fuck are you talking about?" I snapped, jerking my arm away from Sofia's grip, her body freezing as she looked up at me. Her smile was frozen on her face, and her head tilted to the side as she blinked.

"What?" Sofia asked, confused.

"A degenerate? A low life? What do you even know about him?" I said, my voice thin between my clenched teeth.

"What do I..." Sofia breathed, the frown returning to her face, brows knitting. I could feel everyone staring at me once again, Benny's body stiff beside me. "What do I know about him? I know what *everyone* knows! It's not secret that he smokes, and drinks, and has sex with all of *those* girls that spread their legs for him! Everyone has said this! I think it's disgusting!"

One of those girls. Wasn't I, too, one of 'those' people?

My jaw throbbed as I ground my teeth, anger building up inside me.

"Oh, so you've heard everyone say it? What about Nico? Hm? Did you hear him say it too?" I asked, my voice a growl. "You seem to know him so well, you must have talked to him a lot, right?"

"What are you on about, Wes? It's almost like you're defending him," Sofia said, laughing nervously. Her voice was strained as she looked at me, hand creeping forward towards me again.

"And what's wrong with that?" I sneered, slapping her hand away as it brushed my own. "Can't I defend my friend when someone's bitching about him behind his back?"

"B-bitching?" Sofia stammered, eyes like wet saucers.

"What the hell, Wes?!" Parker erupted, getting up from his chair abruptly. Sofia's mouth began to shake as tears formed in her eyes.

"Wes, this isn't like you!" Sofia sniffled, voice cracking. "H-hey, if he's t-threatening you or s-something, we should go to the t-teachers now and-"

"Shut the hell up, Sofia. Nico isn't like that," I said, my voice sharp and final. Sofia's mouth snapped closed, her throat bobbing as she swallowed a sob. As tears spilled from her eyes, she quickly got up and ran from the table, her braid bobbing behind her as she trembled.

"You're a fucking dick, Sof is worried about you and you treat her like shit. No wonder you're friends with someone like *him* ," Parker spat, roughly grabbing his and Sofia's belongings before rushing off after her. My mouth was a thin line as Rachel and Leo glanced at each other, unsure of what to do. Benny, too, was still, though he was looking at me with a complex expression on his face. Unable to meet his questioning gaze, I slowly stood up and picked up my things, mumbling that I wasn't feeling well. No one stopped me when I left the table, my feet taking me to a place that I knew would be safe.

As always, Nico was in the storeroom, and when the door open he was already smiling at me. Crushing his half-burnt cigarette into the ground, Nico's face changed when he saw my dark expression, and his mouth opened to comment on it.

"Don't ask," I said stiffly, Nico nodding in understanding, his eyes searching my face. Lowering myself beside him, I rested my now cold lunch on a stack of foam kickboards, pushing the pasta around absentmindedly. Nico shuffled a little closer to me, until his shoulder pressed against mine. The feeling of his firm body next to me made all the tension wound up in my muscles suddenly release, and a heavy, pained sigh spilled from my mouth. Throwing my fork into the cold pasta, I leaned against Nico's side, his arm encircling me.

"Pretty sure my friends hate me," I said, closing my eyes as one of Nico's hands rubbed slow, tender circles on my bicep.

"Hm, Sofia?" Nico asked, and I nodded. "Did you..."

"Ugh, no, I didn't tell her about... us... But, um, I did kind of snap at her. 'Kind of' is a bit of an understatement, actually." For a moment, I was worried that Nico would comment on the use of 'us', but he either didn't notice or didn't care. Instead, he frowned and nudged my chin, forcing me to look up at him.

"What did she do?" Nico asked, making me laugh dryly.

"You're assuming she was in the wrong?" I asked, shifting myself so I was facing him completely.

"You're not the type to get angry over nothing, so she must have done something," Nico said honestly, making my heart ache. My fingers fiddled with the end of his tie as he pulled me closer, until I was basically sitting on his lap.

"Wonder why I'm always pissed at you then," I said, lips curling as Nico pinched my waist, chuckling. The laughter soon subsided, as the heavy atmosphere returned. Nico's hands moved to lock themselves at my back, his fingers continuing their circular ministrations as he urged me to tell him what she did. Sighing, I took my glasses off to rub at my eyes, which were tired and beginning to burn.

"Um, well, she was sort of... saying things. About you. Things that weren't very nice, and I got kind of angry?" I said, cheeks warming. Nico blinked, before he leaned forward, pressing his forehead against mine.

"Oh? And what kind of 'not very nice' things was she saying?"

"I'd rather not repeat them," I said, face twisting in disgust. Nico's mouth cracked a small smile at my response, his arms pulling me closer.

"Hm, then what did you say?"

"Well, I told her to shut the hell up, and that you're not the person that she was describing you as, though my choice of words had a little more oomph, I guess," I said, Nico humming.

"You really are so daring today," Nico said, kissing me softly. I leaned into his touch, and the darkness in my stomach lightened as I felt Nico smile against my mouth.

"Maybe you're just a really bad influence," I countered, Nico laughing as I kissed him back.

"Do you really think that?" Nico asked as I sunk down to rest my head on his shoulder, inhaling the scent of him.

"Of course not," I said simply, smiling into Nico's jumper as his shoulders shook with his chuckle.

"Thanks, Wes," Nico said, his hand gently caressing my hair. I just nodded, hugging myself to him tighter.

TWENTY-EIGHT

"Nico, can you turn that god-awful music down so I can concentrate?" I grumbled from the passenger seat, Nico just chuckling but twisting the volume dial to the left once, before reaching over to pinch my cheek. Not looking up from my screen, I just let out a half-hearted 'hmph' and puffed my cheeks out, ballooning Nico's finger off my face. My friend-that-I-happened-to-have-slept-with just laughed at the response again, pulling over to the curb as other cars lazily drifted around us.

"Made any progress?" Nico asked, leaning over the centre console curiously.

"Nope," I sighed, sinking into the seat, pulling my glasses off to massage my sore eyes. Not only had classes been stifling with everyone staring at me with questions burning from their eyes, but Sofia had completely ignored me as I passed her in the halls after school, while Parker had not hesitated to hide his ginormous stink eye. I felt bad about what I said to Sofia, but I didn't regret it; I knew that I could have approached it with more tact, but in that moment the anger had just clouded and suffocated me. If I hadn't gotten out those biting words, I may have just choked.

I had planned to drag my feet to the train station and take the train after Sofia's, but instead I almost got run over by Nico when he pulled up to the school, after ditching last period in favour of a nap in another corner of the school. He had quickly scolded me for being so mentally absent, but when he saw my downcast face his chastising had immediately morphed into concern, and I almost cried when he gently tugged on my hand to pull me into the car. He hadn't said a whole lot after that once I assured him that I was fine - a lie, we both knew - and I had decided to at least try and lessen the guilt by sending Sofia an apology. Sure, maybe an apology in person, or even a phone call would be better, but...

I was scared.

Scared that I would get that burning, choking feeling clawing up my throat again, or that Sofia will start crying and I will choke on her tears. Either way, texting was the safest option. I could only hope my eloquent writing could convey some sort of sincerity. Though lacking in courage, I hoped that I would at least have sincerity.

But writing an apologetic text message was not easy, and I had been labouring over the black text on my glowing screen for the entire car ride back to my house.

"It's just a text, Wes," Nico said, lips twitching. "Not an essay."

"Not listening to someone who only gets Ds on their english essays," I replied swiftly, Nico just humming as he fished out a cigarette from an elastic on his front mirror. After struggling for another 5 minutes, Nico's smoke drifting out from the slit in the window and one of his hands gently tapping on my forearm, I just cursed under my breath and pressed send.

Sofia - 4:14pm

Hey Sofia
I just wanted to apologise for what I said earlier today - I was an ass
Sorry for sating those things, I wasn't thinking clearly
If you want to talk, you can contact me any time
Sorry again

"Oh shit, there's a typo," I sighed, Nico plucking my phone from my fingers as I moved to correct it in a subsequent message. Pouting a little, I reached over to Nico to try and take my phone back, but he just shook his head and slipped it into his own pocket.

"At least for the rest of the ride home could you just relax, Wes?" Nico said, blue eyes glinting. Frowning, I crossed my arms and nodded, slumping in my seat. I glanced at Nico's profile from my periphery, and felt the tension in my muscles wane as his small, content smile peeked from his pink lips. A small one appeared on my own mouth as he reached across towards me and linked his fingers with mine.

What had felt like a long, laborious drive was suddenly cut all too short when Nico pulled up in front of my house. Pressing my phone back into my hands, Nico softly pressed a kiss to my lips, obscured in the greyish tinting of his car windows. Pulling back, I couldn't help but lick my freshly pecked lips slowly, Nico smirking at the movement.

"I'll pick you up for school tomorrow," Nico said, more a statement than an offer. Gulping as I nodded, I couldn't help but drop my gaze to his mouth again, Nico letting out a husky chuckle as he pinched my chin in his fingers, kissing me deeply again. I had to swallow back a whine as he leaned back, wiping his saliva off my bottom lip with his thumb.

"See you tomorrow, Wes," Nico said, smiling innocently at my flushed face, which only got redder as I felt the heat radiating from my skin.

"Sure," was all I got out, turning robotically around and diving into my house. I didn't peek out of the window until I heard Nico's car pull away, catching the back of his car turning the corner and smiling giddily to myself as my heart thumped heavily. When I realised what I was doing - a grown guy staring out of his window like an obsessed teenage girl with her panties in a twist - I slapped my cherry-coloured cheeks and shook my head roughly.

"Relax, relax," I chanted, closing my eyes. Only reopening them when I heard my phone beep in the palm of my hand, my momentary calm in heart rate spiked again.

Is it Sofia?

When I looked down at my messages, both relief and disappointment picked at my gut.

Benny - 4:37pm

Hey man
Just want to say
Um

I guess
Im here if u want to talk?

Benny - 4:42pm

As a friend n shit
U know
If ur going thru a hard time
Yeah

"What an idiot," I said, but my heart felt warm anyway. Benny was always overly affectionate, but in terms of saying affectionate things and meaning them in a non-sarcastic manner? He would probably rather choke on his own vomit than say those sappy things. But in his short, choppy messages, I could feel his awkwardness and his concern and his sincerity.

Ha. *Sincerity* .

He sure had a lot more of it than I did.

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2 Weeks Later

"Still no reply?" Nico's voice on the phone asked, and I sighed heavily, Nico clearly hearing my distress through the receiver. "Don't worry so much, Wes. At this point, you've done what you can, and if she's still got a stick shoved up her ass just leave her be."

"Easy for you to say, you're not friends," I whined.

"Maybe it's better if you're not friends," Nico said, his voice a little biting. I blinked before rolling over on my bed, before letting out a low, teasing sound.

"Are you jealous, Mr Beckett?" I teased, knowing full well that Nico definitely was not jealous. I mean, he was Nico Beckett, and I was... just Wesley. And she was just Sofia. At this point, I wasn't even sure if we were friends any more.
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"Sure I am," Nico replied, his voice a little amused, but otherwise unaffected by my words. A little disappointment welled up inside me, but I pushed it aside as I always did and heaved myself from my back onto my legs, sitting up.

"Anyway, shouldn't you be leaving soon?" I asked, Nico letting out a grunt in response.

"Yeah, I'm heading out now. I'll see you on the weekend," Nico said, before hanging up. The momentary calm at our mundane conversation was soon overclouded by Sofia's lingering shadow, and the blank, solitary message I had sent to her a few weeks prior. At first, I was somewhat grateful for the space Sofia was giving us. A few days after that, I began to get a little nervous, since she still avoided my gaze when we ran into each other in the halls. After the first week passed, the nerves turned into stress and I had started to lose a little sleep over it. Benny had noticed that I was lethargic and a little irritable, but he hadn't said anything and just acted chirpy as per usual, trying to rub some of his happy-go-lucky vibes onto me. His method does work, but only when he is next to me and distracting enough to take my mind off the drama with Sofia. When he wasn't, though, the only thing keeping my mind off Sofia's blatant aversion to me and Parker's even more apparent disgust was Nico.

Though I don't stay over at his place over night, I do spend a significant portion of most afternoons with him, even if we don't talk a lot at all. Most of time, Nico was either napping lazily on his bed or watching movies on his laptop while I studied at his desk. The first time I saw his desk clear of junk and debris made my legs turn to jelly and my stomach into a butterfly farm; his desk had clearly never been used by Nico and had turned into a second wardrobe, but he had actually cleared it to make space for me to study on. In a room full of Nico, with his image and his smell and his very being plastered everywhere, on the far side of the room was a little space of me. I had to catch myself from wondering what it would be like if there was more 'me' in this room, but that was just useless, hopeful longing.

The whole mess with Sofia was only part of my every-growing headache. I still didn't know where Nico and I stood, or if we were even standing in the same field. Even though we talked every day, cuddled every now and then,

kissed and laughed and bickered, I still hadn't forgotten that this was *Nico Beckett.* No matter how many late nights we spent talking, or how warm it fells lying in his arms, I always wondered how much longer it would last. Was it a month's worth of nights, a week, or just one more night?

I felt sick whenever I imagined the day that this nameless thing would end.

Mood effectively dampened, I flopped onto my stomach and buried my head into my pillow, which had no smell. I was wading so deep in my own despair that I didn't notice when Jamie had walked into my room, her lithe body jumping on my bed as she let out a raucous cry, her hands seizing my sides as she tickled me. I shrieked at her invasion and rolled off the bed nimbly, before tripping on my bed post and tumbling into the floor in a heap of gangly limbs and two-day hair.

"Jamie!" I yelled, picking myself up from the floor and glaring at my sister, who just smiled at me from my bed.

"Good, you seem to have a little energy left in you," Jamie said, making me tilt my head to the side in confusion, anger dissipating. "Come on, Wes. You've been like a zombie this whole week! Mum's worried, but with work and all she's hardly home, so she asked me to take care of my little brother."

"Jamie, please don't," I said, waving away her affection with a slight grimace. "I'm really, completely, totally fine."

"You're really, completely, totally *not* fine," Jamie rephrased, hopping up from the bed to link her arm with mine. Jamie's grip only tightened when I tried to weasel my arm from her grasp, giving her a withering look when I realised I could not win. "See? Really, completely, totally not fine."

"Shut up," I mumbled, huffing as she finally let go.

"Mhmm," Jamie said, completely ignoring me as she rummaged through my wardrobe, throwing some clothes at my head haphazardly. "Now put those on. I'm not sure what's bothering you, but we're going out! You look so bummed out, it's making even *me* bummed out."

"Yeah, you look really sad right now, Jamie. And what do you mean 'going out'? Do you mean going out to get takeaway, because that's not going out." I said sarcastically, pulling on the jumped she had thrown me, before glancing at her own outfit. Unlike her usual scruffy appearance, Jamie was wearing tightly fitted jeans, a crisp white V-neck T-shirt and a leather jacket. Even her hair wasn't greasy, and had been let down from its usual top-knot to rest down her back in naturally-set curls. She actually looked human. "Oh, you're being serious about going out. You're not wearing pyjamas."

"Okay, you're an ass but I'll forgive you," Jamie said, pulling on my arm again as we made our way to the car. "Now, it's a Friday night, and I just finished exams so let's go bowling! We haven't done that in a while, not since... Oh, but we need to get food first, I'm *dying* . Steak? I'm feeling steak. Let's get steak."

I didn't even bother to counter my sister, who had already peeled off the side of the road and almost rear-ended another car in the process. All thoughts of Sofia and my not-so-clear relationship with Nico flying out the window as I braced myself against the door and dashboard, surviving the car trip to the local bowling a far more pressing matter than my own relationship issues.

Jamie really works wonders. She knows how to get your mind off things.

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I watched my sister eat with mild disgust on my face, wanting to reach forward to either slap her or wipe the gravy off her cheek. Or just slap that gravy off it, killing two birds with one stone.

"You're such a slob," I sighed, shaking my head as I neatly cut my own steak, Jamie not even looking up from her meal. "Dad would definitely yell at you for eating like that, Jamie."

"Hmph, yeah, he would," Jamie said coldly, rolling her eyes before looking up at me, frowning. "But he's not here, so I'm going to eat like this, cool?" Not really caring if she made a mess of herself since I was used to seeing
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her in an even worse condition in the comfort of our home on a daily basis, I just shrugged and let her continue inhaling the steak and mashed potatoes as she pleased.

"But when's dad coming back anyway?" I asked, Jamie pausing from her oesophageal inhalation for a brief second.

"Don't know. Beats me," was all she replied with.

"You don't miss him? He hasn't been back in months! Wasn't he supposed to be back last weekend?"

"Eh, not really. He's gone so much, so I'm not too torn up about it," Jamie said with ease, shrugging her shoulders as she reached across the table to stab at a slice of my steak, popping it into her own mouth. Juices squelched as she chewed, and her loud swallow and subsequent exhalation of satisfaction made me glance around the restaurant to see if people were giving her strange looks. Fortunately - *sort* of - only one of the waiters was looking at her, and instead of disgust on his face, he was instead discreetly trying to check Jamie out from behind the counter. Turning back to my sister, who had since wiped off the wayward gravy and was now sitting with a gleeful smile on her face, was looking quite civilised. Poor, fooled waiter.

"Ah, that was good," Jamie said, patting her belly as she looked at me, eyes asking if I was ready to go. Nodding, Jamie quickly paid for the two of us, the waiter fumbling over the change as Jamie barely spared him a glance, slinging her arm over my shoulders as we tumbled out of the restaurant.

It didn't take long to reach the bowling alley by car, and Jamie had managed to park somewhat presentably in the parking lot out the back. The familiar bowling alley, where my dad had taken the two of us often when we were younger, had changed since those days but still held some of the defining characteristics that made it a place of great comfort to me. Sure, the old bricks had a new paint job, and some of the blinking neon lights had been replaced, but there was still that slightly stale smell and kind of divey feel in the air. Shabby, but warm and familiar; I didn't mind it at all. Jamie was even more in her element, her inner slob feeling right at home as she pulled

on the battered rental bowling shoes, which were scuffed to high heaven but still somehow managing to stay on her feet.

"So, should we make a bet?" Jamie asked, eyes gleaming as she grabbed her first bowling ball. Grinning a little at her challenge, I thought carefully for a moment.

"I win, you take my bathroom duty for a week!" I said, Jamie paling at the thought, before steeling her nerves and sticking her pinky out.

"Damn, you don't play games. Fine. Then if I win... you tell me where you've been spending all your time and coming home all giddy and lovestruck!"

"H-huh?" I blabbered, flinching. "What kind of request is that?!" Before I could deny her request, Jamie had jammed her pinky finger into mine and shaken twice.

"A bet's a bet! Don't chicken out on me now, Wes!"

"I fucking hate you," I groaned, Jamie sticking her tongue out as she got ready to bowl. Staring at my sister's back and praying that she messes up, I let out a sigh of relief as her bowling ball skittered off to the side, hitting only two pins. Jamie's brow was deep set in a frown as she grabbed another bowl, quickly rolling it down the alley. I wanted to cry when her second ball knocked down all the remaining pins, Jamie jumping up in her happiness and her eyes alight in my misery.

"Better loosen up your tongue, Wes. I feel like tonight I'm going to be hearing *aaaall* about a certain somewhere... and someone."

"Not if I can help it," I nervously gulped, grabbing a bowling ball as Jamie sat down, but not before ordering a Coke and two sets of fries. Both for her, of course. My unsettled nerves were calmed when I bowled a spare as well, Jamie huffing at my success. The next few rounds continued in much the same way; Jamie and I were not far apart in skill, and our points were more or less always within 5 to 10 points of each other. Somewhere along the way, I had forgotten about the weight of the bet and just found myself

letting go and having fun. Jamie seemed to notice, and her competitiveness seemed to fade slightly when she saw me snorting at her failure, tears springing to my eyes when she slipped and landed on her ass while her ball rolled sleepily into the gutter.

"Don't laugh at me, you asshole!" Jamie yelled, getting up herself to pinch my side. I yelped, but continued to laugh as she reached for another ball, giving the inanimate object a stern pep-talk, before caressing it with her cheek.

"... Wes?"

I heard my name spoken from a few paces behind me, and confused, I turned. Surprise was written on my face as I saw Nico standing there, an equally perplexed expression on his face, his blue eyes looking at me intently. Our linked gaze was broken when someone punched Nico's shoulder good-naturedly, the movement making Nico's body step forward with the impact. Looking at his entourage, I recognised them all as previous students at my school. All in the year above me, and all Nico's friends from his previous year level before he flunked.

From behind Nico, someone let out a loud wolf-whistle, and the sound sent shivers down my spine. Turning to the noise, I followed the guy's gaze, and gagged when I saw it land on my sister, who had paused her turn to look at me curiously, her gaze suddenly making me very uncomfortable.

"You know these guys, Wes?" Jamie asked, and I opened my mouth, but no sound came out.

At this point, Jamie might not even have to win the bet. Just my luck.

TWENTY-NINE

"Oh no, no, no, no, no." The two-letter word was a panicked chant in my head. *"Just my fucking luck!"*

I gulped when Nico's brows furrowed, his eyes flicking between me and my sister, before turning to his friends. The downward slant of his dark eyebrows only increased when he turned back to me, concern evident on his face.

"Wes?" Jamie asked again, prodding me in my side. "Do you know them?"

"U-Um, they're upperclassmen. From my school. I think. Uh, I didn't know them too well though," I managed to get out, my voice scratchy. My hands were clasped in front of my fingers nervously wringing themselves out like wet, sweaty towels.

"Hmph, it's probably a good think that you didn't know them too well," Jamie muttered under her breath, ignoring the lecherous gazes some of Nico's entourage were boring into her. A little uncomfortable, Jamie pulled some of her hair in front of her shoulders, shielding her robust cleavage that she usually had no problem showing. Still, Jamie did not slouch nor cower away, and instead just made an effort to ignore the seedy remarks some of the guys made.

Apart from Nico, I only knew two others by name; one was Colin Jennings, a tall, muscular gym-rat that had far more substance in his biceps than his brain. Though a bit of a neanderthal, I had no real issues with him, since out of the whole group (including Nico), he was probably the most approachable out of all of them. A dopey, lazy smile was always on his face, and despite being the bulkiest out of everyone at school, he never used it to bully others, but probably only because he was too lazy to do so. The other person I recognised was Isaac Masters. Back when he was still in highschool, for someone like me, he was someone I wanted to steer clear from. Much like the Nico I thought I knew before, he was a womaniser and

a troublemaker, but far more cruel than Nico ever could be, both then and now. He was good looking, though always considered second only when compared to Nico, but his eyes were a little too cold, and his aura a little too intimidating. He was considered Nico's best friend, and I guess, he probably still is.

I don't like Nico standing beside him.

The Nico that I had come to know did not look right standing next to someone like Isaac. Nico, who was surprisingly gentle and kind - though sometimes teasing and blunt - did not seem that way beside Isaac. It had been a long time since I was reminded of who Nico was, and somewhere along the way I had realised that the Nico that I snuggled with in the pool shed, that cooked me pasta and stayed up talking to me in late-night phone calls, was not the *whole* Nico. There was a Nico that I didn't like. A Nico that scared me. That Nico was one that called Isaac a friend, a friend who was currently striding up to Jamie with one corner of his thin lips pulled up and eyes rolling up and down over her ample curves.

"Ugh," Jamie gagged, giving me a look and a barely-hidden eye roll. Isaac, of course, was too busy looking at her boobs to notice her expression of disgust, and only stopped walking towards her when he could lean over her smaller stature, the sour scent of his cologne washing over the two of us in waves of nausea.

Finally looking up at Jamie's face, which was drawn down in displeasure, Isaac only smiled to show his straight, refrigerator-white teeth.

"You look bored," he said, glancing at me with a chilled smirk. "Want to ditch your boyfriend here and come with us? I'll *definitely* show you a good time." I saw Jamie's throat bob up and down as she swallowed her vomit, taking a step back towards me.

"I'm good, thanks," Jamie said coolly, staring at Isaac without budging.

"Aw, don't be like that, babe," Isaac snickers, reaching out to grab Jamie's thin wrist, tugging on her arm a little. "Leave that little twig behind, he could never satisfy someone like you."

"Ugh, and you could? Get a grip," Jamie spat, wrenching her arm out of his grip, shaking it as if his hands left some kind of poisonous goop all over it. Turning to me and grabbing my hand, Jamie quickly said that we should leave. I nodded, agreeing instantly. As we started to walk, Isaac swore loudly, his vice-like hand clamping on Jamie's shoulder, pulling her back. Her hand slipping from mine, Jamie hissed as she was whirled around, Isaac's smile only growing icier and icier, though the upturned mouth did not match the livid expression in his eyes.

"Did you think you can just leave after talking like that to me, bitch?" Isaac hissed, his eyes narrowing as he only smiled wider. Jamie's usually stoic face faltered a little, and her hands balled into fists by her sides. Swallowing thickly, my stomach churning and my heart thumping out of my ribcage, I forcefully wrapped my arms around Jamie's waist and pulled her back behind me.

"Don't touch my sister, you asshole!" I yelled, my voice cracking a little as Isaac's teeth gnashed together, before returning to their usual position in a snake-like grin.

"Oh, *sister* ? What, do you two have some weird thing going on? You keen on your sister or something, fucking psycho," Isaac snorted, some of his friends chuckling at his jibe. Stepping forward until he was towering over me, my eye line only meeting his upper chest, my legs shook as I struggled to maintain my ground and not run out of the bowling alley peeing myself.

"I'm not keen on my own sister, you prick. And frankly, she's even *less* into you," I spat, my voice surprisingly stable despite the tremor in my hands. I felt Jamie grip the back of my shirt nervously, trying to tug me backwards and away from Isaac, but it was already too late. Once my words registered in his brain, Isaac's smile was wiped from his face and his fist was already arcing through the air.

Instinct made me raise my arms up to shield my face, but it did little to stave away the blow, since Isaac was not a petit guy and I wasn't a strong one at all. His fist collided with my forearm, immediately making me let out a grunt of pain. The sheer force of the blow made me topple over with my eyes clenched shut, my body crashing to the ground. I let out a second noise

of pain when I hit the floor, my leg twisting as it collided with the side of the bowling ball dispenser. My arm burned with a bruising, throbbing pain, but my leg felt like it was on fire, as if someone had grabbed it and tenderised it with a meat hammer before throwing it onto a charcoal barbecue.

"HEY!"

A deafening shout was unfurled and there was a second crashing noise, followed by a few gasps and a series of grunts. I felt hands grabbing my shoulders and Jamie's voice by my ear, her usually teasing tone drenched in concern. Opening my shut eyes, my mouth opened with an audible pop when I saw the cause of the second crash.

Isaac was on the floor, hand across his jaw and his eyes open wide in shock as he looked upwards. Nico was standing over him, his booted foot on Isaac's chest, and his fist throbbing red around the knuckles. His back was strained and his jaw was locked tight, his blue eyes hotter than the burning in my leg. His mouth was curled downwards in a snarl, his lip ring somewhat menacing as he pressed flexed his leg muscles, pushing a dazed and injured Isaac further onto the ground, like a bug under his shoe.

Finally snapping out of his stupor, Isaac shoved Nico's foot of him, getting up hastily to grab Nico by the front of his shirt. Nico didn't move to stop him and just continued glaring at Isaac, his fist shaking in anger.

"What the *fuck* , Nico!" Isaac gritted, Nico's eyes narrowing.

"What the fuck?" Nico scoffed, grabbing Isaac's wrist, his fingers digging into the flesh there without remorse. Isaac's mouth twitched in pain, but Nico did not relent, and just shot out his knee into Isaac's stomach. Isaac visibly paled and was again sent to the ground, clearly not expecting Nico to hit him again. They were best friends, and Nico had never hit him before. Hell, they hadn't even argued before, which most found surprising since Isaac was a hothead and Nico never held back on his words. "You start punching people, and you ask me ' *what the fuck'* ?"

Isaac spat on the ground, staring at Nico with anger in his eyes.

"Seriously, Nico? You bail on us every weekend, and now you're suddenly some kind of community morals guru? What the fuck is wrong with you?" Isaac said, pulling himself up again, but this time staying a body length away from Nico. "You never cared before, but now you're a fucking pussy."

Nico just raised a brow, his own lips moving from their downturned frown into one of slight mocking.

"Me?" Nico asked, voice a low, shiver-inducing growl. "The one that just got floored twice is calling *me* a pussy?"

Colin snorted aloud from the group standing to the side, while the others in the group just looked on at Isaac and Nico's spat in both shock and curiosity. Isaac's face turned red and steam was almost wafting out of his ear, his veins popping out of his skin as his blood boiled.

"Nico Beckett, you're a fuckin-"

Isaac began ranting but was cut off when Nico rushed forward and sent a punch into his gut, right on the place he kneed just moments ago. All the blood rushed out of Isaac's face as well as his breath, and for a third time he was on the ground.

"Make that three times," Nico spat, rubbing his slightly red knuckles before turning to his friends. "You guys invited me out, but since someone's a little injured I think we should call it a night." Nico's statement gave no room for negotiation, and his posse just nodded before slowly ebbing their way towards Isaac, who swore at them when they tried to haul him up. Only Colin stood back, giving Nico an apologetic look, before also going over to Isaac. Instead of helping him up, Colin just got out his phone and took photos of Isaac in pain on the ground from multiple angles, an amused grin on his dopey face the entire time.

"Hey, Wes, are you okay?" Jamie asked, her hands flittering here and there across my aching body. First grabbing my arm, she poked and prodded at the tender meat there, not even apologising when I hissed in pain.

"I was okay before you starting poking me!" I whined, pushing Jamie's hands off my injured arm and cradling it to my chest protectively. Jamie ignored my outburst and continued moving her hands down my body searching for injuries, before peeling up the hem of my pants. Even the slight movement made me flinch as a burst of pain travelled up my leg. Frowning, Jamie looked at my inflamed ankle, and let out a low 'tsk' under her breath.

"It looks really swollen, Wes. Hopefully it's just a strain, but considering how hard you fell it could be fractured," Jamie said, sounding a little like mum in her nurse mode. Understanding what she was saying and not denying the fact that my leg was extremely sore, I let Jamie help me up and slung my arm over her shoulders, letting her take some of the burden of my weight. The two of us hobbled out to the carpark, but before we reached the car, I smelled the familiar scent of tobacco and musk. A hot hand then pressed itself to my lower back, both calming and nerve-wracking at the same time.

"Wes," Nico said, his voice soft and gentle, much unlike the Nico that had been beating Isaac up a few minutes prior. Gulping, I managed to turn myself around, Jamie's face growing darker and darker as she saw who had stopped us.

"Hey, Nico," I said, managing to give him a weak smile, wincing a little as I wobbled on my leg. Nico's face contorted in concern again, his eyes tracking down to my leg. The hem was raised a little when Jamie inspected it, and the skin beneath was visibly red and puffy.

"Wes, are you okay?" Nico said, reaching out to help shoulder my weight. When his hands got close, Jamie's own snaked their way to the front, slapping away his approach.

"He's not okay, and no thanks to you and your friends," Jamie said bitterly, moving her body forward in a small attempt to separate me from Nico.

"I'm sorry," Nico said, his voice showing no falsehood nor defence for his friend, his blue eyes as clear as ever. His concerned face, his apology, the way his knuckles were a little red from punching Isaac. Even the way his

outstretched fingers shook a little as he wanted to help hold me upright, all of it made my heart itch.

"It's okay-"

"-Not okay!" Jamie and I said at the same time, our responses clashing. Jamie then turned to me, anger evident on her features. "No, Wes, this is *not* okay! You got punched! Your leg is busted! So there is no way in hell this is 'okay'." Jamie lectured me passionately, before turning to Nico, her anger even more inflamed. "And *you* . Take your violence and disgusting friends away from us, and away from Wes. You've done enough damage."

"Jamie, it's not his faul- ow!" I started, Jamie silencing me with a stare and a sharp pinch on my injured arm.

"Wes, we're going home so mum can look at your leg," Jamie said firmly, and I could only meekly let her half-drag, half-carry me across the carpark to her car. Glancing back at Nico, I gave him an apologetic smile, one that he returned, his eyes heavy and his heart sorry.

THIRTY

My injured leg dangled off the side of the chair listlessly, feeling fat and puffy and constrained in the tightly wound bandages. After getting back home last night, Mum had immediately leapt off her supine position on the couch and shoved a bag of frozen peas on top of my throbbing ankle. As a nurse, she had taken one lingering look at the red and puffy ankle, quickly icing it and wrapping a bandage neatly around it, ordering me to take it easy as to not exacerbate the severity of the sprain. Although the pain had calmed down a little, it was still painful and throbbing, and when I re-wrapped the bandage this morning the skin beneath them was significantly bruised and hot.

Sighing as I nibbled on my small square of buttered toast, Jojo let out a concerned whine as she brushed past my bandaged foot. Seeing her eyes looking at my injured limb sadly, I cracked a small smile and rubbed the top of her head, her sad whines turning into a satisfied rumble. The momentary happiness only lasted a short while, however, as I recalled Jamie's words from last night.

After getting confined to the bed by Mum, Jamie had come in and pestered me about the group of people from the bowling alley, and in particular, Nico. My sister did not hold back on her less-than-stellar opinion of the group, and to be honest, I couldn't blame her. Isaac was a total dick-wad - even I knew that. As she dished out an expletive-laden monologue about how unsavoury Isaac was and how she would have to shower in boiling water and antiseptic to get rid of the nasty germs he left on her shoulder, I had nodded along, agreeing with everything she was saying. However, once she ran out of breath, her face red and eyes livid, she had moved on to the next target of her disgust.

Nico.

She first started talking about his tattoos; filthy and gangster-like, she said. I did not say anything, my lips held together in a thin line as I swallowed

back my words. At first, I had thought his tattoos were a little scary, but these days I found myself looking at them fondly, and enjoyed tracing my fingers along the intricate lines of his dark designs. After expressing her disgust of his body art, she moved on to his piercings; she didn't have too much to say about the ones adorning his ears, but she did not hold back on his lip ring. Unhygienic, only on good-for-nothings who don't want to get a decent job. The thin line my lips made tightened and the corners of my mouth curled down. I was fond of his lip ring; it suited Nico's striking face, and when it pressed against my lips when we kissed...

My face had immediately flushed when the thought wandered into my mind, and Jamie mistook the change in colour for hatred, not embarrassment. Thinking I was getting equally as riled up as she was, Jamie's mouth kept moving, turning from a shotgun to an automatic rifle.

She then started calling Nico a violent thug, and this was when I had to physically bite my lip to prevent myself from snapping at my older sister. When she recounted how he had beaten Isaac, as much as it was satisfying to see that pig on the ground, Jamie was still adamant that anyone who physically hurt others was a menace and deserved to be put away. Maybe a few months ago, before I knew Nico Beckett - the *real* Nico Beckett - I would've thought the same thing. I *did* think the same thing. But now I knew that the Nico Beckett that Jamie sees was not the real one. The real Nico Beckett held me gently and kissed me softly, he cooked me pasta and took me on a picnic. That Nico Beckett doted on his grandmother and worked hard to support his family.

That was the Nico Beckett that I had come to love.

When Jamie's mouth had opened again to say yet another vile comment about Nico, I had quickly blurted out that I was tired and wanted to rest, shoving Jamie off the foot of my bed with my good foot and burrowing myself under my blanket, face red and hands balled into tight fists. Jamie hadn't said anything, and just pat my good leg twice, before heading out and letting me rest. Before the door had even clicked behind her, I had already dialled Nico's number, holding the phone close to my ear as I pulled my legs up, curling into a ball. The moment Nico picked up, a husky ' *Wes* ' wafting through the receiver, my tight shoulders had melted and everything

drained away in a breath. We talked for a short while about simple things, both of us not mentioning the events of the evening, just listening to each other's voices before I eventually drifted off into sleep. When I checked the phone in the morning, I saw that the call had not been cut off for a while after I fell asleep, the thought making me smile a little.

Still, Jamie's words from that night still left me with a bitter feeling, her negative words about Nico making my stomach churn. Sighing heavily again, I quickly finished off my breakfast and finished getting ready for school, limping my way through the motions. Luckily, mum had a pair of crutches on hand from a time when Jamie had sprained her own leg, and I could hobble around on them, though I was still uncoordinated and clunky. Managing to gather my schoolbag and my wits, I hobbled outside, wondering if I would make it to the train on time with only one sound leg.

When I stepped out onto the front porch, I couldn't help but blink in confusion, my mouth popping open. A car was parked on the curb, a tall, lean figure leaning against it, smoke wafting from his lips. Seeing me emerge, Nico gave me a lopsided grin, dropping his cigarette onto the pavement and stepping on it with the ball of his foot.

"Nico, what are you doing here?" I asked, using my crutches to awkwardly walk towards him. Nico's smile faltered for a second as he saw me struggle to reach him, before his face returned to its usual one of cool calmness, his arms just reaching forward to pull my bag off my shoulders, alleviating some of the weight. Despite the heavy books inside it, Nico easily hooked two of his fingers around the top strap, the heavy bag held in the air without any strain nor effort. Nico's other hand then wrapped itself around my waist, pulling me into a tight hug.

Out in broad daylight, my face immediately flushed and I nervously looked around, pushing on Nico's chest helplessly.

"H-Hey, we're outside, Nico," I whispered nervously, Nico just chuckling.

"Mm. Just for a second. Please," Nico breathed, nuzzling his face into the crown of my hair. The hand around my middle tightened, as if he didn't want to let go, and I just let out a breath, relaxing into his embrace when I

saw that there weren't any people around. After a few seconds, Nico finally let go, giving me a small, slightly sad smile. Seeing this unusual expression on his face, I opened my mouth to question it, but was stopped when Nico abruptly opened his car door and threw my bag inside, before opening the passenger side door and gesturing for me to get in.

After helping me climb in, Nico grabbed my crutches and threw them into the backseat next to my backpack, getting in himself. I crinkled my nose as the strong smell of tobacco swirled around in the car, some traces of ash evident on the dashboard. Nico had recently reduced the amount he smoked around me, and usually tried not to smoke in his car since I didn't like it. I wondered why today the smell of tobacco was thick.

As we drove to school, Nico was mostly silent, only responding when I asked him a direct question, such as whether I could open the windows to air out the car, or turn on the radio. Halfway through the drive, I couldn't take the silence anymore, and poked Nico's side when we reached a red light.

"Are you mad about something?" I asked, growing a little nervous as Nico's grip on the steering wheel tightened. "U-Um... if it's because I complained about the smoking, I don't mind if you do it with the windows open. Kind of."

Nico glanced at me then, before turning away, loosing a strained sigh. I gulped down a bolus of saliva when Nico didn't answer, my fingers tapping nervously on my knee. Fidgeting as the red light turned green, I tried to string sentences in my head to try and alleviate Nico's agitation, until he pulled down a side street near school, shoving the handbrake up and fingers turning down the radio until it was just silence in the car. The only sound was just me taking a sharp, nervous breath, and the click as Nico undid his seatbelt. Feeling his body moving closer to me, I stiffened, swallowing thickly.

I gasped when Nico simply leaned over the centre console and wrapped his arms around me, pulling my head into his chest. The fingers of his left hand ran through my hair, while those on his right softly stepped up and down my back, caressing me tenderly.

"Nico...?" I gulped, confused but also a little curious. Nico had never held my quite like this before - tentative, like I was glass. He was always gentle, unless we were in bed a he was more... passionate. But even then, he never did anything that he thought would hurt me. Now, though, he held me as though he thought he *would* hurt me.

"I'm sorry," Nico murmured, kissing my hair as he spoke the words. "For letting my friends do that to you, and your sister." Nico pulled back, his eyes flicking to my bandaged ankle, eyes darkening. Following his gaze, I let out a light laugh, this time snaking my own arms around Nico's waist, squeezing him softly.

"It looks worse than it is, really," I assured him, "It's already a lot better, it shouldn't be long until I'm out of the bandages."

Nico just gave me a look of disbelief, his concerns not the least bit lessened by my words.

"I'm really sorry, Wes," Nico said again, rubbing my back in large, slow circles. "I shouldn't have let Isaac-"

"Nico, you really don't have to apologise. You didn't do anything wrong," I said, giving him a small kiss at the corner of his mouth, a small smile on my face. "If anything, I should be thanking you. You... stood up for me. I mean, you punched your friend for me. Multiple times."

"I'm not sure we're friends any more," Nico said, smirking a little as he shrugged, making me laugh. His light-hearted expression soon turned a little gloomy as he sighed. "But Wes... I was kind of worried that you'd... think less of me. After seeing... that." Looking up at Nico, my heart fluttered as I saw him avert his eyes from mine. I couldn't tell if he was worried, or embarrassed, or a mixture of both, but the sight of Nico a little vulnerable made my heart swell.

"Nico," I said, moving my hands up to cup his face, forcing him to look at me. His bright blue eyes reluctantly looked at me, softening when he saw me smiling up at him. "I could never think less of you. Only more, if that's even possible."

Nico blinked once. Twice. Three times. And then dipped his head and gave me a kiss on the lips, his mouth curling against mine before speaking.

"Thanks, Wes."

A/N: Sorry for the delay! I honestly forgot the name of Wes's dog and had to flick through the chapters to refresh my memory. How dare I forget the name of this story's most important character haha

THIRTY-ONE

After snuggling for a little in his car and talking about how Jamie is not so fond of Nico - which made him frown noticeably until I stressed that I didn't think the same way - Nico finally drove the rest of the way to school, parking the care in one of the spots closest to the door. In plain sight, the two of us were not difficult to spot by students walking into the school building, the stares of people passing by poking at my back. Unlike the other day, I was too preoccupied with trying to manoeuvre my crutches without stumbling to care about the stares.

As I gestured for Nico to give me by backpack, Nico just snorted and swatted my hand away, carrying it in his left arm as his right helped me hobble up the steps to the school. With Nico's help, it didn't take me an embarrassingly long time to reach my locker. Shoving my things inside and grabbing the books I needed, Nico did not let me carry anything despite my whining, and just snatched all of the books from my hands into his. As I opened my mouth to complain again, Nico just sent me a fiery glare, stubborn in his quest to not let me carry anything. Giving up, I just let Nico hold onto my things, despite having to go to a different class - not that he was planning on attending, anyway.

"Nico, people are just going to spread weird rumours about me again, you know?" I sighed, shakily wobbling to my class as Nico carefully stuck by my side, holding my books. Glancing around at the hallways, people were unashamed in their staring, probably wondering why Nico Beckett was holding my books for me. Nico just raised a brow curiously.

"What rumours?" Nico asked, and I scoffed.

"You haven't heard them?" I asked incredulously, Nico shaking his head.

"I never really cared for rumours," Nico said, shrugging again. Laughing at his nonchalance, I began to list out the weird rumours about myself that I had heard floating around.

"Some people think you made me your slave, buying you cigarettes and things when you were too lazy to do it yourself," I said, chuckling. "Another one was that I was initiated into your 'gang'." As I said this, Nico let out a snort, his eyes crinkling as he laughed.

"I'm not sure what gang they're talking about, but you? In a gang? I'd honestly pay to see that," Nico said, snickering. "Any other rumours?"

"Yeah, but this one is kind of true," I said, giving Nico a mischievous grin. "People have been saying that you force me to do your homework for you since you're failing."

"Pfft," Nico said, waving away the rumour, his nose crinkling like he smelled something bad. "I never did that."

"Oh, *reaaally,* Nico?" I drawled, wiggling my brow. "I happen to remember a certain bio project..."

"Hey, I recall opening up my home to you for that project. Not to mention my wardrobe. The top shelf smelled like beans for a few days after that, you know. Even got a little mouldy," Nico said, shivering. Seeing my shoulders shaking as I tried not to laugh, Nico cracked a smile, ruffling my hair. "Yeah, okay, that last one is kind of true."

"Ah, so honest," I mused, mimicking something that Nico always teased me about. Nico's smile grew wider at my words, the two of us laughing as we walked down the hallway. As we made it to my classroom, Nico was about to walk in to help me carry my books, but was stopped by Benny, who was running at full speed down the hallway to avoid being late.

"Wes wait up!" Benny called out, waving a hand frantically. Nico gave Benny an amused look as Benny's face grew nearer, his eyes noticeably widening as he saw Nico standing beside me. His feet screeched to a stop as he tentatively looked up at Nico, gulping.

To my surprise - and Nico's - Benny managed to push out a small smile towards Nico before looking at me and my bum leg.

"Hey, cripple," Benny said, making me hit him with the foot of my crutch. Benny hopped around in exaggerated pain, before turning towards Nico. Thinking he would clam up and start sweating under Nico's heavy gaze, I opened my mouth to say something, but was shut up when Benny got the words out before me.

"Hey, Nico," Benny said, face a little red from running. "I'll take Wes's books from you." Benny did not hesitate to pluck my books out of Nico's hands, hefting them against his chest. "Jesus, these are heavy."

"Thanks, Benny," Nico said, chuckling a little. Benny's eyes widened a little, but he just coughed and nodded, turning to me.

"Let's go, Wes. We're almost late," Benny said, opening the door for me. Blinking at him, and then at Nico, I couldn't help but laugh.

"Yeah, yeah, okay Benny," I said, stepping forward on my crutches, looking back at Nico as I passed through the door. "I'll see you later?"

"Mhmm," Nico said, the corner of his lips upturned as he watched me disappear through the door.

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Lunch time soon came around, and if there was one words that would describe the mood around the lunch table, it was definitely *tension.* It was basically palpable, and hung suffocatingly in the air around us. Rachel was sitting at the end of the table, shoulder rigid as she read her book, though everyone noticed that she hadn't turned the page in about 15 minutes. Leo, sitting opposite her, was pushing his food around with his fork, extremely focused on staring at the broccoli in front of him. Benny was sitting next to me, his leg shaking nervously under the table while he flicked through his phone aimlessly, trying to look busy. Parker, on the other hand, had an annoyed frown on his face and was staring at me with heated eyes. Sofia, sitting across from me, had her arms bundled up in her lap and kept looking around the table, occasionally brushing over me with sad, lost eyes.
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The first half of the lunch break was spent just like this, everyone silent with the occasional chewing noises or ping from Benny's phone as he played a game on it. The stalemate of silence was only broken when Parker let out a loud growl, unable to contain himself any longer. Standing up, Parker shoved a pointed finger at me, waving it aggressively.

"Wes, don't you have something to say?" Parker asked, words clipped and harsh. Looking up at him, my head tilted to the side, I blinked as I leaned forward.

"Say what?" I asked, my voice steady as I stared back at him. Parker's face immediately turned bright red with anger, his veins throbbing as his lips pulled back in a small snarl.

"You-" Parker started, his chest heaving. I tensed a little, bracing myself for the tirade that was to come. Even though he hadn't said anything, I knew exactly what he was searching for - an apology, for what I said to Sofia. But too bad, because the one that really needed to apologise was Sofia, for saying all of those vile things about Nico. As Parker's mouth opened, his expression ugly, Sofia suddenly stood up, cheeks red.

"U-Um, Wes!" Sofia said loudly, Parker snapping his mouth shut, his teeth clacking harshly. Everyone turned to Sofia, before looking at each other awkwardly. Sofia's cheeks only grew more red, her hands in tight, sweaty fists as she gave me a tentative glance. Seeing me look back at her, Sofia gulped and continued. "U-um, can I talk to you? Alone?"

In all honesty, I didn't want to talk to her - these days every conversation with Sofia drained me. At times, it felt like I was being drowned and suffocated by her words, and at other times, it felt like I was talking to a brick wall. I was both hearing too much and not being heard, and it was tiring. So very, very tiring. Talking to Sofia was difficult, unlike how it was with Nico. With Nico, it was easy. Warm. Calming. *Right.* Everything that Sofia was not.

Despite my reluctance, as everyone around the table stared at me and waited for my answer, I couldn't help but be pressured and murmured a quiet 'sure', standing up to follow Sofia to a secluded area near the outdoor

dining tables. Out of the eyes and ears of everyone in the group, Sofia nervously fiddled with the end of her plait as she nibbled on her lip. Glancing at the watch around my wrist, I frowned a little - lunch time was ticking on, and Nico was probably waiting for me in the pool shed.

"So, what did you want to talk about?" I asked, my words a little rushed.

I want to see Nico.

"U-Um, I just wanted to apologise," Sofia said, giving me a weak smile. "I... didn't know you and Nico were friends. I shouldn't have said those things about him."

"Mm," I said, glancing at my watch again.

Nico's waiting.

"I didn't mean to hurt you, and I really don't want this to ruin what we have," Sofia continued, fingers now fiddling with the hem of her jumper.

I don't know if we have *anything. Not like the thing I have with Nico...*

"Sofia," I said, voice firm. The shorter girl looked up at me with large, round eyes, lashes fluttering. The sight of her doe eyes looking at me did not stir me up nor make my stomach flip. In fact, it didn't make me feel anything at all.

"Yeah, Wes?" Sofia asked, her voice tentative and the hairs on the back of her neck bristling, sensing danger.

"Sofia, I really don't think that we ar-"

"W-Wait!" Sofia blurted out, cutting me off as her eyes grew wide and became a little watery. Sofia waved her hands out in front of her, her face frantic.

"Sofia, we're really not mea-"

"A-Ah! I forgot that I have a m-meeting!" Sofia stammered, voice shrill and panicked.

"Sofia, can you please ju-"

"S-Sorry, Wes, but I have to go! U-Um, I'm going away with my family for the holidays, but I'll message you lots, okay? I'll see you next term, yeah? I'm going to miss you a lot, but I'll message you!" Sofia said, her voice rushed as she forced a smile onto her pretty face. "B-Bye, Wes!"

Before I could stop her, Sofia's body was already across the patio, disappearing between a set of sliding doors. I felt anger boil inside my stomach, but swallowed it down as I carried myself with my crutches to the pool shed. The familiar smell of chlorine began to settle the bubbling in my gut, and when I opened the door and saw Nico sitting there, I felt lighter. He had a lazy, expectant smile on his handsome face, his hand outstretched as he gestured for me to come closer. Not needing to be told, I hobbled over and collapsed onto the ground, setting myself in his lap with my legs resting across one of his thighs.

Nico let out a chuckle as I snuggled myself into his arms, letting out an exhausted sigh into his neck.

"Want to talk about it?" Nico asked, pulling back a little to peer at my face. Looking up at Nico, I shook my head, burying my face into his chest, inhaling the scent of him.

"In a bit. I want to hug you first," I said, Nico grinning.

"So honest today, Wes."

"Just shut up and hug me," I said, poking Nico's side. Nico just laughed, murmuring an amused 'yes, sir', before wrapping his arms tightly around me.

See? This feels right.

A/N: Thanks for reading! I'm starting to run out of pre-written chapters to post weekly... school has been hell and the stress is starting to get to me ugh. I might have to start slowing down the chapter releases a little, but hopefully I can pump out some chapters on the weekends :) We'll see how school goes!

Again, thanks for reading!

THIRTY-TWO

The holidays had started, and frankly... I was bored. Incredibly, overwhelmingly bored. I had powered through most of my holiday homework and had hung out with Benny for a little, until he jetted off with his family to somewhere tropical for the break. My family, on the other hand, was running much the same as it always did; Jamie's break didn't start until a few weeks later, and she was currently locked in her room studying for her midsemester exams, and was so snappy that mum and I can't even go within three steps of her door without her yelling that we're making too much noise. Mum, on the other hand, was at work most of the time, and when she came home she was often too tired to do much, let alone take the family out for outings.

The first few days had been fine - I had stayed at home and watched movies, played games, read books. It was really quite relaxing, and at first I honestly thought that a whole holiday of just that would be fun. I was wrong - something was missing, and it was painfully obvious as to what that was.

Nico.

Since it was the holidays, Nico picked up more and more shifts; not only was he working at the bar most nights, he was now working during the day at a car repair store that a relative of his owns. It was because of this that I hadn't seen him for over half a week. Sure, it was only a handful of days, but I had gotten used to seeing Nico almost every day, so suddenly not seeing him, hearing him, touching him was a slap in the face.

Sighing heavily, I slapped my cheeks before pulling up to my desk, dumping a few worksheets onto its surface. Nothing like doing homework to stave away the boredom. A few equations in, my mind began to wander.

I wonder what Nico is doing right now...

Shaking my head wildly, I sucked in a long, full breath before exhaling.

"Focus, focus," I chanted, closing my eyes before opening them, forcing them onto the formulas dotting the paper.

I wonder if he's had lunch yet...

I frowned at myself, catching my thoughts that always seemed to drift of in Nico's direction. This had been happening a lot lately, Nico drifting in and out of my thoughts. Sometimes I would see something that would remind me of him; a car the same model as his, or tattoos on arms that weren't quite as nice as his. Sometimes there wouldn't even be a precipitating image. I could be sitting there, doing nothing, and he would just *appear* . It was both incredibly annoying, but even more frustrating.

I miss him.

I want to see him.

I sat there for a few moments, pencil twirling between my fingertips. After a few twirls, the pencil dislodging itself from my hand to clatter gently onto the table, I stood up resolutely, grabbing my jacket from the back of my chair.

I'm going to see him.

Flicking through our messages on my phone, mouth quirking up at the memory of some of our conversations, I found the message detailing the name of the garage that he worked at, and quickly keyed in the address. It was neither far nor close, with no convenient train lines going there. If I had a car, it would be an easy 10 to 15 minute drive, but without it, it would be about a 45 minute walk. With my bum leg, walking was out of the option, so I had to bus instead. The bus lines were always unreliable and I hated taking them, but in all honestly, I was a little desperate.

The walk to the bus stop was not too long, but I did have to stop to rest my strapped leg and butchered armpits once, the crutches digging deep and rubbing the soft skin there raw. When the bus came, I sat near the front and

rested my crutches beside me, staring out the window as my uninjured leg tapped impatiently on the floor. The span of time between me stepping onto the bus and seeing the shop sign blinking with half faded fluorescent lights disappearing from my memory, exciting starting to bubble. All I could feel was the anticipation building up in my veins, as the smell of rubber and metal started to waft from inside the garage.

Walking inside the shop, a small bell above the door tinkling softly, I was immediately greeted by a short, robust woman, whose curly hair was tied in a messy knot about her head, revealing flushed rounded cheeks and a wide, gummy smile that went all the way to her eyes.

"Afternoon, love!" the woman chirped, waving her hand from behind the desk. Being her height, I could tell that she was struggling to peer over the ledge, her head bobbing up and down as she rose and fell on her toes. "What brings you in today? Car trouble?"

"Oh, um, no," I said, laughing awkwardly. Rubbing the back of my neck, I glanced around the shop, Nico nowhere in sight. It was not unexpected; Nico would be working out the back where the repairs are done, not at the reception. Still, my heart couldn't help but tremble a little in disappointment.

"Oh? Then are you due in for a car service?" the bubbly receptionist asked, already moving to check their books. Shaking my head again, I tapped my fingers on the edge of the counter, an embarrassed grin on my face.

"Um, no, I'm not here about my car... if I had one," I said, cheeks flushing as the woman gave me a confused look. "Uh... I'm here to see my friend? Nico?"

The receptionist's eyes immediately lit up, her smile widening as she clapped her hands together.

"You must be *him* ! Oh, you are really cute! No wonder Nico can't stop talking about you. Oh, your shy face really is so cute!" the woman gushed, and I felt that if she was tall enough to reach over the counter, she would have pinched my cheeks and pulled them this way and that as if I were a

baby. "I'm Shelly, by the way. My husband owns this garage. He's Nico's uncle, on his dad's side."

"O-Oh," I said, a little overwhelmed. *Nico's been talking about me... to his family?*

Somehow, the thought did not make me uncomfortable. In fact, it made me feel warm, my cheeks heating up again. Shelly must have noticed my changing complexion, and her eyes lit up like stars.

"Oh, sorry!" Shelly immediately said, slapping her lips as if she were scolding them. "I always talk too much!" Leaning forward, her hand by her mouth and eyes darting around, Shelly gave me a tiny grin. "My husband always says that I blab too much, can't keep secrets to save my life!"

"It... it's okay," I said, coughing nervously. "Um... but is Nico around? Oh, but if he's busy I can just wait..."

"Oh, it's no problem, no problem! As his boss, I can just extend his break time, especially if *you're* visiting!" Shelly chortled loudly, pounding her chest as she gloated, before hobbling around the corner, the keys dangling from her neck clinking. "This way, this way. You came just in time, his break just started."

"Thanks," I said, giving Shelly a small smile, which she returned two-fold. Just as we walked through the door, my phone buzzed in my back pocket. Pulling it out, my mouth popped open in surprise as I saw that it was a message from Nico.

Nico Beckett - 4:31pm

Hey, I'm on my break
U free to talk?

I could feel my lips curl up into a smile. Sometimes I wondered if Nico ever thinks about me, like how I think about him. I wondered if he would lie awake at night after we've hung up the phone and just thought about me. I wondered if when he woke up he would first check his messages to see if

I've wished him good morning. I wondered if he would see things on the street and be reminded of me.

I wondered how important I was to Nico Beckett, because he had become important to me.

When he sends me simple messages like this, I started to believe that maybe, just maybe, he thought a little about me too.

Fingers quickly replying, I couldn't help but chuckle, Shelly giving me an amused sideways glance.

Wesley Dillon - 4:31pm

Nope, busy

Sending the message, it did not take long for three little dots to appear beneath my message. In the span of two breaths, the dots disappeared and were replaced by a grey-coloured message bubble.

Nico Beckett - 4:32pm

With what?

I didn't reply, as Shelly lead me further back into the garage. The smell of metal and rubber only increased, but it didn't put me off - Nico sometimes smelled a little like this, but with the fresh scent of shampoo mixed in, with a hint of tobacco.

"He should be over there," Shelly said, gesturing towards a small enclosed room, the plastic curtains pulled down, obscuring the view inside.

"Thanks, Shelly," I said, Shelly waving away my thanks.

"No, no, I should be thanking you! Nicolas has been so cheerful lately, and it's obviously because of you! We're all really happy!" Shelly said, making me redden again. "So cute! He did say you get red really easily!"

"I-I really don't!" I stammered, Shelly just laughing further, patting me on the back.

"Sure, kiddo. Anyway, have fun! Don't worry about break time, Nicolas has been working hard, he deserves a bit of a rest now and then. Let him know not to rush for me, m'kay?"

"Sure. Thanks again," I said, Shelly waving as she walked back to the reception area. Hand on the knob, I quickly glanced at my phone, which vibrated again.

Nico Beckett - 4:33pm

Wes? You ok?
Where are u?

Smiling to myself, I tucked my phone away and opened the door.

"I'm heeeere," I said, drawing my voice out teasingly as Nico's head whipped up, his eyes wide. Nico blinked in disbelief, before glancing around as if to see if someone was pranking him, before his mouth popped open in an elated grin. Getting up from the couch he was seated upon, his dark blue work gear stained with black splotches and bare forearms a little shiny with exertion, Nico immediately crossed the small room and pulled me into a hug.

"Yuck, you smell," I teased again, scrunching up my face as Nico just smirked, kissing the tip of my upturned nose. Despite the smell, I snuggled into his arms anyway, enjoying the feeling of his arms wrapped around my middle. As I buried myself into his embrace, Nico's smile only widened, his eyes still alight with surprise.

"What are you doing here, Wes?" Nico asked, pinching my side softly. "Did you miss me that much?"

"Hmph," I grumbled, giving him a tiny glare as I poked his side. "Well someone kept picking up shifts so he has no time to see me."

Nico's smile faltered for a moment, and his face looked a little guilty, which made me drop my act to press a chaste kiss against his lips.

"I'm joking, Nico. I do miss you. A little. Kind of. Not really," I said, recanting my words as Nico's smug smirk graced his face again.

"Hey, Nico, do you know where the- oh," a deep, surprised voice called from behind, the door swinging open. I jumped a little, turning in Nico's embrace, eyes widening when I saw Colin Jennings standing there. A large footlong sandwich was in his left hand, and a 2 litre juice bottle filled with water in the other. His bulky frame filled the entire door, and his eyes were trained on us.

Oh my god. Colin Jennings? Nico's friend Colin Jennings?

Nico's hands wrapped around my waist were suddenly burning hot, and I wriggled myself out of his embrace. Nico just looked at me, a little amused but also disappointed, Colin blinking at the two of us.

"Wait, so the person you're talking about is him?" Colin asked, head tilting to the side as the gears began to spin in his thick-skulled head.

"Mhmm," Nico hummed, smirk deepening as he watched me tremble in fear. No one had ever seen us in a compromising situation like that before, and that was how I wanted it. I wasn't ready to be out in the open with this... relationship. For now, I wanted it to just be a secret between the two of us, something shared in his home and the pool storage room, or the shady rooftop with a view. It wasn't something I wanted my friends to know, and definitely not his friends to know. Now that Colin has seen us, I could only imagine how it would slowly but surely spread. Colin... Then Isaac... Then all of their friends. Those alumni from my school would definitely tell some people in my year, and then once it reached school grounds it would spread like wild fire, scorching everything around me until it crumbled to ashes.

"N-Nico..." I stammered, staring at Colin wide-eyed. Colin just stared back at me, his eyes narrowing a little as he seemed to look me up and down, before his face suddenly morphed into something... dopey.

"I should've known! I was surprised when Nico suddenly started punching Isaac, but no wonder he did! I really was wondering why he was so pissed, but it's because it was you, huh? Oh, is your leg okay? That fall looked gnarly, you went flying and everything! Sorry, Isaac is kind of an ass, but he buys me food all the time so..."

Nico snorted at my flabbergasted expression, stepping closed to me to slowly snake his arms around my waist, pulling my back into his chest. Resting his head on my shoulder, Nico grinned at me.

"Wes, this is Colin. Colin, this is Wes," Nico said, his eyes crinkling as he took in my shocked face. Pinching my cheek lightly, Nico attempted to smooth out my frozen features.

"Y-You... Nico... What are you... Hey!" Face burning up, my brain caught up to my body and I whirled around, thrusting my finger towards Nico's face. "You! You've been blabbing about things to everyone! Shelly said... Shelly said..." Remember Shelly's embarrassing words, my face only grew hotter. "About me... she... you..."

"Wow, he really does go bright red," Colin chimed in from beside us, his head nodding dumbly. "You really weren't lying, Nico."

Giving Nico a look, I gritted my teeth as I whipped my crutch up, hitting him square in the shin. Nico winced a little, but it didn't stop the husky laughter that poured from his throat.

"Nico Beckett, I swear to God I'm going to-" my words were snuffed out when Nico pressed a sneaky kiss to my lips, my eyes widening to saucers.

No sounds came out of my throat as I stared up at him, before jerkily turning to look at Colin, who had plopped himself down on another couch and started munching on his sandwich, only looking at us with a blank look.

"Oh, don't mind me guys, I'll finish my food and be out of here in no time," Colin said, leaning back into the worn couch.

Turning back to Nico, my erratic heart beat stumbled as he pressed his forehead to mine, pulling me a little closer.

"I'm glad you came, Wes," Nico murmured, his voice working its magic as the knots in my muscles seemed to melt and the panic from my body slip into nothingness.

"I'm glad, because I missed you too."

A/N: Thanks so much for reading! I'm still pretty behind with school and whatnot, but I'll try to work on writing more chapters so I can keep up with the weekly chapter releases, but we'll have to see :)

THIRTY-THREE

Colin was busy smoothing out his hair into a mirror lying in his locker as I leaned against the wall next to Nico's, its owner pulling off his work clothes and hanging them neatly on a coat hanger inside. I couldn't help but gulp, throat wobbling, as Nico's muscles flexed when he pulled the shirt over his head, a generous waft of masculine musk and a hint of his aftershave tickling my nose. Nico's eyes flicked over to me as I shifted nervously on my feet, his head tilting to the side in a silent question, before he took in the spreading heat in my cheeks. Lips curling into a knowing grin, Nico just chuckled as he swung the door of his locker open wider, obscuring us from Colin's eyes, pulling me roughly with his arm to press a hard kiss to my lips. Squeaking, I half-heartedly swatted at his chest, Nico's chest rumbling as he chuckled, releasing me from his grip.

"Lookin' a little red there, Wes," Nico teased, the little growl at the end of his words making me shiver again, cheeks only growing more and more heated. "You okay?"

"Fine. Perfectly fine," I said flatly, crinkling my nose while crossing my arms over my thundering chest. Nico laughed again, closing his locker with a loud metallic thunk, before turning to Colin.

"See you later, man," Nico said, Colin turning to him, one of his hands combing through freshly gelled hair and the other holding an apple to his mouth.

"You're not going? Pre-drinks is at mine, and then to town, remember?" Colin asked, and I gave Nico a questioning look. He hadn't said that he had plans after his shift. An uncomfortable, niggling itch at the bottom of my stomach began to swell. Was I getting a head of myself? Was I too bold in thinking that Nico's only plans revolved around me?

Ah... Again. I forgot that this was Nico Beckett . *He's Nico... and I'm just... Wesley. Don't forget that.*

Keeping my face blank, I turned my gaze down to my shoes, toes rubbing circular motions into the dirty floor.

"Nah, I think I'll take Wes home," Nico said, hand reaching out to grab mine. Eyes darting back to Nico's, I opened my mouth before I could really think.

"O-Oh, if you already have plans, I'll just bus home. Don't... Don't mind me," I said quickly, a nervous chuckle filling the air at the end of my sentence. I wiggled my fingers and untangled my hand from Nico's, its palm suddenly very wet and warm. Wiping my hand on the fabric covering my thighs, I gave Colin a small smile, already turning my body around, crutches dragging on the ground.

"Well, Wesley could just come with us? I'm sure the guys won't mind. Oh, well, Isaac might but he won't pull anything with the two of us there," Colin said, elongated canine tooth peeking out from his lips as he grinned, cracking his knuckles in front of his abdomen.

"H-Huh?" I stammered, my injured foot suddenly throbbing a bit more at the mention of Isaac's name. "Thanks for the invite, Colin, really, but I think it's better if I just go home..." Turning back to Nico, I gave him a small tug on the hem of his shirt, giving him a (hopefully) reassuring smile. "Don't worry about me, just go have fun with your friends. I'll message you later."

Nico searched my face for a moment, blue eyes narrowing, before sighing heavily. Bending his towering body down slightly, Nico quickly wrapped his arms around my hips, letting out a grunt as he slung my torso over his shoulder.

"N-Nico! What the hell!" my choked, shocked voice squealed. Crutches wobbling in the air, Nico's hands wrapped around my legs and my head hanging at his back, I could not nothing but dangle from Nico's arms like a limp noodle, sweat beginning to pool at the back of my neck as Colin stared at the two of us, his jaw stopping its rhythmic chewing motion.

"Maybe next time, Colin. Wes and I are just gonna go home and take it easy tonight," Nico said, squeezing the hand clutching onto my thigh, making me

yelp. Colin finally swallowed, nodding slowly, before grinning.

"Yeah, sure, man," Colin said, his nods becoming larger and bolder as the grin also grew in tandem. "See ya too, Wes. Don't let Nico bully you too much, yeah~?"

"B-Bully?" I coughed out, Nico laughing as my legs swung in the air, my body rocking like a seesaw over his shoulder. "No one's bullying anyone!"

Nico already walked (carried) the two of us out the door and towards his car parked out the back.

"Nico, put me down! I can walk!" I grumbled, body squirming as I feebly slapped the leg of my crutch against the back of Nico's leg, Nico just grunting in response as he hefted my body up, tightening his grip around my wiggling legs. *"Nico, seriously!"*

"Wes, *seriously* , stop moving around," Nico laughed, pinching my leg and making me let out an obscene noise from the base of my throat. "I'll drop you if you keep moving around like that."

"Good, I'd rather you drop me than endure being in this embarrassing situation!" I huffed, moving and writing more and more, Nico letting out a strained groan as he had to reposition his entire arm around my circumference to hold onto me, but as his grip tightened he let out a rumbling laugh. The sound was hearty, incredibly warm, and I could feel it all the way down in the pit of my stomach. I could imagine the way his usually nonchalant face would light up, his eyes narrowing a little as they gleamed, and carefree slope of his lips as they pulled upwards to reveal his straight teeth.

Damn him.

"I'll seriously drop you if you keep that up, Wes," Nico said through bouts of laughter, his hands patting my leg. Nico let out a cheeky chuckle we his hand crept a little further up, fingers pinching the meat of my ass that hung over his shoulder.

" *Nico!"* I yelled, not caring if there was anyone else around in the carpark to hear me. "What the fuck!" Turning my body to try and look at his face, Nico just continued to laugh, my body shaking as his shoulders heaved.

"Hm? I just had to get a better grip on you. You keep moving around, after all, don't want to drop you when you're already injured," Nico snickered, pinching my ass again, a little harder this time. My angry retort was swallowed up by the clipped yelp that left my lips, my hand slapping over my mouth as Nico snorted.

"Did you say something, Wes?" Nico said, voice on the brink of another laughing fit.

"N-o," I gritted out slowly, hitting Nico's back with my crutch again as he finally lowered me down into the passenger seat of his car. Face scrunched up and avoiding Nico's gaze, the boy just shook his head and chuckled again, pinching my cheek before getting into the driver's seat and pulling out of the garage carpark. The rest of the drive was quiet, and after a few turns my displeased expression eased, Nico glancing over every now and then to assess my mood. When he deemed that I wasn't going to clock him over the head with my crutches, Nico's hand slid over the centre console to entwine his fingers with mine, resting our hands on my lap. My lips twitched upwards for a brief moment, Nico catching it as he glanced across, a satisfied hum simmering in his throat.

"So," I said, rolling our hands on my lap as my free hand traced the outlines of the tattoos around his forearm. Nico let out a soft noise from his throat to let me know he was listening as he kept his eyes on the road, the barely-there smile on his face never falling. "What are we doing now?"

"Hm..." Nico said, glancing at the clock of his car. "Dinner first?" Nico looked over at me and I nodded, stomach tickled with butterflies.

"Yeah, sounds good. Where are we eating?"

"Well... I have some ingredients at home," Nico said, the left corner of his mouth lifting a little further. "I could whip something up for us."

"Pasta?" I asked, turning to him, eyes bright. Nico laughed, squeezing my hand once.

"If that's what you want," Nico said, foot pressing on the break as the car pulled to a gentle stop at a red light. Twisting his body to turn to me fully, Nico leaned across to my side, pressing his mouth to mine. A little surprised, it took me a moment to return his kiss, Nico smiling against my lips. "And for dessert... well, I think you could provide that." Nico murmured against my skin, making me pull back, eyes wide and mouth open limply.

"Y-Y-You..." I stammered, releasing his hold on my hand to hit his shoulder harshly, Nico just grinning.

"Hey, don't distract the driver," Nico jokingly scolded, making me let out a frustrated groan, which was the last sound either of us made before we reached Nico's house. As he parked the car, I messaged mum that I would be staying over at a friend's house, though she was probably busy at work and wouldn't check her phone until her break. Texting the same thing to my sister, who teasingly asked if I was with Sofia, I rolled my eyes and didn't bother replying to her words which left a bitter taste in my mouth. Suddenly, I was craving something sweet for dessert, something that would get rid of that bitter taste.

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I let out a long, muscle-soothing sigh of relaxation as I elongated myself on Nico's couch, hand happily rubbing my well-stuffed stomach. Nico's sigh was more in exasperation as he carried our empty plates to the kitchen, though I noticed that his eyes softened a little as he glanced over at me. Nico didn't take too long, simply rinsing off the plates and leaving them in the sink to clean at a later time, wiping his damp hands before crawling onto the couch above me, knees straddling my sides as his hands grabbed onto my wrists and pulled them over my head. He didn't press down with much force, his hands just softly resting on mine.

"You look very comfortable," Nico said, peering down at my lazy, sated expression.
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"Mhmm," I replied, blinking slowly as Nico lowered his head down, black hair gently falling onto my forehead. "I think I ate too much though, I can barely move now. You're definitely still trying to fatten me up before you kill me, huh?"

"Shit, you found me out," Nico said, letting out a feigned gasp of shock as he leaned down further, kissing me slowly. "What should I do with you, now that you've exposed my plans..." Nico mused, making me grin at his joking.

"You should just let me go," I said, pitching up my voice as I put an exaggerated pleading expression on my face, Nico stifling a laugh by pressing a kiss to my cheek. "Pretty please?"

"Now why should I do that? You'll run and tell someone about my plans, and we can't have that, now can we?" Nico said, moving his mouth to the side to nibble on my earlobe. A groan left my mouth as I turned my head to the side, opening up my neck to Nico's face, which buried itself there at the silent invitation. "Maybe I should tie you up, to make sure you don't run away?"

The implication of his words made me shiver, and Nico felt it, his lips curling against the skin of my neck. His body, pressed against mine, was so warm and the way his arms surrounded me made my stomach flip. Nico pulled back again, eyes shining, before pressing kisses along the side of my face, on my jaw, and then back to my lips, lingering there. His touch was so light, nothing forceful about them and yet they had me rooted in place. He treated me so gently, as if I were precious, special. As if he *loved* me.

But he never said that he did, never even hinted at it. I may love him, but Nico... Nico probably didn't love me. He said he was curious, and once his curiosity was fully sated...

I didn't even want to think about what would happen when that time came.

If only I could tie him down, to make sure he didn't run away, to have him hold me like this months, years, decades into the future. All he had to do

was gently kiss my lips to leash me to him, but I didn't even know where to begin to do the same to him.

So, all I could do was smile up at hims, dislodging my hands from beneath his to wrap them around his neck and pull him closer to me and kiss him a little harder, a little more desperately...

And enjoy it while it lasts.

A/N: So this is my last pre-written chapter that I've got saved up, so releases from now onwards still haven't been written up yet... I'll try to get another chapter our next week, but I can't make any promises since school has not been kind to me haha Anywho, thanks for reading and I'll see you in the next one! <3

THIRTY-FOUR

"You're hanging out with Benny today, right?" Nico asked, yawning at the end of his sentence. Laughing at his tired voice wafting through the phone, I hummed out a 'yes' as I leaned over the bathroom counter, spitting out my mouthful of toothpaste. Splashing water over my face and smoothing down a few wayward tufts of hair, quickly got changed as I listened to Nico begin to drift back to sleep. After working the night shift at the bar last night, Nico was exhausted, but still managed to call me around the time I woke up. Remembering his groggy voice hitting my still half-asleep ears, my stomach tightened and a grin crept its way onto my face.

"Go back to sleep, Nico," I urged gently, Nico grumbling something sleepily, the sound of his sheets rustling.

"Mm-hm," Nico sighed, a slight blush splashing across my face as I held the phone close to my ear, his relaxed, sleep-coated breath right beside me. "Have fun with Benny, Wes. I'll see you later."

"Yeah, see you later," I echoed, hanging up the phone. As much as I wanted to spend all day with Nico today, I had started to neglect Benny just a little, but for some reason he wasn't pestering me to keep him company like he usually did during the holidays. It was a little strange, since Benny is usually always knocking on my door unexpectedly during the holidays forcing me to hang out with him, yet this time he had only mildly made plans with me over the phone. I would be lying if I wasn't a little concerned, but when we talked nothing seemed amiss. When I did see him, he was the same old Benny.

It didn't take me long to bus to Benny's place, and when I got there I found that the front door was already open and waiting for me, as always. Walking in and locking the door behind me, I kicked my shoes off and walked upstairs and into Benny's bedroom, not bothering to knock. When I walked in, my mouth immediately dropped open. Expecting to see Benny either passed out on his bed or splayed out with a game controller in his hand, I

was surprised to see instead that Benny was half buried under a pile of seemingly unwashed clothes, a distraught expression on his face. When he saw me, he immediately threw a large bag at my face.

"Throw anything that smells like it hasn't been washed since Christmas last year in there," Benny ordered, a faded T-shirt that was mysteriously damp hurtling towards my face straight after. Clumsily dodging the projectile, I gave Benny an unamused look as he let out a 'tsk' under his breath, sniffing another shirt before crinkling his nose.

"Did you just invite me over to help you with your chores?" I asked incredulously, shaking the bag in my hand. "Really, Benny?"

"Of course not," Benny said, waving away my words as his lips curled up in a cheeky grin. "I just wanted to enjoy your company. And it so happens that I can enjoy it while we clean my room."

"I hate you," I said flatly, Benny cupping his chin as he wiggled his fingers, lashes fluttering.

"And I *looooove* you too," Benny sung jokingly, making me throw a discarded pair of jeans at his face.

"Gross," I said, rolling my eyes slightly. Benny's smile dropped slightly as he tilted his head to the side, staring with a tight expression on his face. Raising a brow, I returned his odd gaze with a questioning look.

Shaking his head, Benny rummaged around on the ground, throwing me a single, stained sock.

"Nah, I was just trying to figure out how long that hoodie's been unwashed for. I think it's been less than a month so it should be fine," Benny said, shrugging emphatically. Giving him an incredulous sigh, I picked up the hoodie he was gesturing too from the back rest of his desk chair, stuffing it into the laundry bag.

"The fact that you don't know when you last washed it means it should be washed, you filthy cretin," I said, Benny snickering.

"Less name-calling, more sniffing my judgemental friend," Benny said, throwing another garment at my face. It continued on a lot like this for another hours or so, and by the end of it my nose was spent, back aching and arms tired, but at least Benny's floor was visible. When the over-loaded washing machine began whirring, the two of us moved into the lounge room, Benny bringing over some snacks and drinks as I booted up his Playstation.

"Think fast," Benny shouted as he walked past, throwing a packet of chips at my face. Barely having any time to think at all, let alone think fast, the packet hit me square in the face and pathetically dropped into my lap. Benny snickered as he plopped himself next to me, a smug grin on his face. His smile only widened when I sent him an unamused glance, sighing heavily as I kicked his controlled over to him.

As usual, Benny was extremely vocal as we played, yelling out every time he killed a zombie, and letting out frustrated groans whenever he died. He was also very fast to tease me when *I* died, him having to run through throngs of zombies to revive me while playfully whining about how I was so needy.

However, by the third game, Benny had grown quiet. Instead, every now and then he would glance over to me, before turning back to the game. After four rounds, the two of us lying there dead and the game screen flickering back to the menu, Benny whirled around, face looking pained and lips tight, as if he were trying to hold back a mouthful of spew.

"Okay, Benny, cough it up," I said, grimacing. "You've been looking at me strangely for the past hour."

"Huh?" Benny asked, face slackening immediately as he rubbed the back of his neck. "Oh, nah, don't worry about it..."

"Really?" I asked, leaning on my elbow as I half turned to look at him, eyes narrowed. Benny gulped, his knee bobbing up and down as he seemed to argue with himself mentally for a brief moment. Sucking in a breath, Benny cleared his throat, turning to me with an almost guilty look.

"Uh, Wes, we've been friends for forever, right?" Benny started, chuckling a little at the end as he continued to rub the back of his neck awkwardly. I nodded, Benny smiling a little as he cleared his throat again. "Um... and I told you I'm always here for you, right?"

"Right...? Is this going any where, Benny?" I asked, Benny snorting as his knee quickened its nervous shaking.

"Oh, right. Uh..." Benny looked at me, swallowing thickly again, before continuing. "I kind of saw you..."

Oh.

"Uh... you know... the other day, after the whole thing with Sofia, I saw you... Um..." Benny continued.

Oh no.

"You know, in the store room... behind the pool..."

Oh, no, no, no, no, no.

"Uh, you and... Nico."

"Oh," was the only sound that came from my mouth. Benny's words echoed in my head, only drowned out by the thundering of my heart. Everything stood still as Benny fiddled with his hands, coughing again a little awkwardly as he cautiously glanced to gauge my reaction. He was neither relieved nor worried, just hesitant as I simply sat there, legs crossed and eyes looking anywhere but at him.

He saw us. He saw me and Nico. He knew.

He knew everything.

Oh God, oh God, oh God.

"Yeah, but Wes, you don-"

"Don't," I choked out, turning to Benny. "Please, j-just..." My throat began to itch as my eyes grew hot, lower lip quivering as I choked back both my words and tears. As my vision began to blur, my chest began to heave as I sucked in tight, shallow breaths that seemed to burn my scratchy throat.

Breathe, just breathe, goddammit.

"Hey, Wes, calm down..." Benny said, worry clouding his tone as he leaned forward, arms outstretched.

He knows, he knows, he knows.

Aching chest, foggy head. Everything began spinning as I struggled to control my breaths, which just spiralled out of control. The tears that I had been desperately trying to hold back began to fall as I leaned over, trembling hands bracing my body on the ground as my breaths were interrupted by loud, cracked sobs that shook my entire body.

"Oh, shit," I could barely hear Benny mutter, my ears ringing with my erratic heart beat.

Benny knows. He knows. Who else knows?

"Wes, Wes, hey, calm down, okay? Shit," Benny murmured, hands awkwardly orbiting my surroundings, yet hesitant to touch me. As another sob wracked my body, Benny let out a strained breath as he gently clasped my shoulders, squeezing them a few times.

"It's okay, Wes," Benny said, coughing as his words came out a little rough. "Breathe man, just breathe. It's, um, it's okay. Really."

Yes, breathe. Just breathe.

The air passing through my throat whistled as I forced my muscles to relax, wiping my eyes with the back of my hand. Benny's hands moved from my shoulders to my back, patting it awkwardly as I coughed between breaths, which began to deepen and slow as the moments passed by. Benny didn't

say anything more as he just pat my back, only stopping once he felt my shoulders rise and fall without labour.

"Wes, you good...?" Benny asked, peering at my carefully. Sniffing to stifle the moisture starting to dribble down my nose and wiping the evidence of my tears from my cheeks, I managed to let out a weak laugh.

"I kind of feel like shit, to be honest," I replied, Benny snorting.

"You kind of look like it too, to be honest," Benny responded, a teasing grin gracing his face as I lifted my head to look at him. Cracking a smile despite myself, Benny sighed in relief, his body leaning backwards like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders.

"You scared the shit out of me, Wes," Benny huffed, kicking my thigh with an extended leg. "Thought you were gonna pass out or something."

"Hmph, I wouldn't pass out in front of you. You'd probably freak out and pass out yourself. I wouldn't put myself in such danger like that," I said, swatting his prodding leg away.

"Oh, ouch, Wes," Benny whined, whipping out his other leg to poke me. "Well, at least you're, you know, using words and not having a minor medical emergency now." Benny's words immediately silenced me, my eyes dropping back to the ground.

"Benny..."

"Wes," Benny said, kicking my leg again. "It really is fine. I mean, it's shocking... and super, well, *shocking* , but... It's okay. I've known for... a while now, and I've had a lot of time to think about it, you know? And before you say it, yes, I do actually *think* from time to time. And I think, at first it kind of... weirded me out?" The moment the words registered, my throat seized. Benny, noticing my reaction, immediately jumped to his feet, arms waving rapidly in front of him as he shook his head.

"No, no, no, no, I didn't mean that in a bad way! I mean, I've just known you for so long, suddenly finding out something so big was just really

shocking! I mean, anyone would be shocked when they find out, right? Right."

"S-So... what do you *'think'* about... you know... this whole thing," I asked tentatively, glancing up at Benny, whose mouth curled up slightly.

"About the gay thing? Or the Nico thing?"

"U-um... both?"

"Oh, well I got over the gay thing pretty quickly. You like dick, that's cool, that's cool," Benny said, cackling at his vulgarity as my cheeks flushed. "The Nico thing, though..." Benny said, voice drifting off as he looked down at me. Silence only followed, forcing me to ask him to continue.

Oh God, it's great that's he's not super freaked out by the... gay... thing. But Nico? What if he doesn't like Nico. What if-

"The Nico thing is so fucked up," Benny said, stopping my breath midway.

"Wh-what?" I stammered, eyes wide as Benny waved his hands wildly in the air above his head.

"Like, damn, Wes! How the fuck did you reel in someone like *that* ?" Benny yelled, quickly jumping behind me to grab me in a head lock with his right arm, his left hand ruffling my hair without a care for my poor scalp.

"I mean, *Nico Beckett,* Wes! You're with Nico Beckett? Dude is scary as fuck, but I mean, he has - sorry, *had* - girls draped over him left and right. And, no homo, he's pretty good looking, but he's with *you* ? It's so fucked up that you have so much game and I'm here struggling to find a date for formal," Benny half-screamed as I struggled in his head lock.

"Benny, Benny, I can't breathe!" I choked out, Benny releasing me from his grip after another two head rubs.

"Wes, seriously, you have to tell me how the fuck you two, uh, got together. Dating? Or friends with benefits? Actually, you're such a prude being

friends with benefits is probably not an option. Tell me *everything* , you secretive asshole," Benny pleaded, almost kneeling on the floor in a bow.

For a few seconds, all I could do was look at Benny, mouth open in surprise and heart... relieved.

He's okay with it. With everything. Then... everything may be okay.

At least, for today.

A/N: OKAY I AM SO, SO, SO SORRY FOR THE SUPER LATE UPDATE. I know I mentioned that I had exams etc. but let's just say that the exams totally obliterated me. And the school work didn't even end after exams, so I've just been drowning in papers and just general misery, so writing was so far from the front of my mind, which unfortunately meant that this story was sort of put on hold... But, I'm back now, and can hopefully try and get chapters out like before (though it may still be hard since I am a bit busy with life atm, but I'm working on it!)

Thanks so much for reading this chapter and sticking with the story, it means a whole lot! :)

THIRTY-FIVE

"Wait, wait, wait," Benny suddenly spoke, pausing the game before turning to me. After, well, "coming out", Benny and I had relaxed into our normal routine, which was both surprising and comforting. Apart from the occasional question about my relationship with Nico and other related matters, Benny didn't dwell too long on the whole 'gay' thing, which I was grateful for. Expecting another question about Nico, I put my own game controller down and turned to Benny, only to find his face gravely serious. Flinching a little at his troubled expression, I found myself growing nervous again.

"Benny...?" I asked carefully, Benny's finger tapping on his leg.

"Um... but since you're, you know, with Nico and all... where does that leave Sofia?" Benny asked, and I blanched visibly. Seeing my ghostly complexion, Benny sighed heavily. "Damn, Wes. Who would've thought that you out of all people would be stuck in a love triangle."

"Ugh, what love triangle," I spat, hairs rising on the back of my neck. "Sofia... Sofia and I were never a thing... I've told her that." Pausing slightly, I scratched the back of my neck meekly. "At least, I've been *trying* to tell her that."

"Well, I think you've gotta try harder, Wes," Benny said, patting my arm. "You're my bro and all, but if you lead her on then you're kind of being a dick. I know you like dick, but I'd rather my best friend not *be* a dick, you know?"

Giving Benny a withering look at his quip, I rubbed my eyes as the whole situation with Sofia started nibbling at my conscience again.

"Trust me, Benny, I've really tried to tell her. It's just... hard," I said, Benny nodding. "And, it's like she doesn't want to hear what I have to say."

"Have you tried messaging her?" Benny asked, and I nodded emphatically.

"Yeah, I did - it took me a good three days to write out one message, but I did. But... apparently she doesn't get phone service overseas, and her hotel internet is dodgy so..."

"The fuck," Benny said, raising a brow. "Those are bullshit excuses if you ask me."

"Well, I didn't, but yeah," I said, rolling my eyes. "That's kind of always how it goes with Sofia... Any time the conversation even begins to smell of something she doesn't quite like, she just bolts and cuts me off. I don't even know what to do..."

"Well, you've got to let her down some time, Wes. If you told her about you and Nico she would definitely-"

" *Not. Definitely not* . We are definitely *not* telling her about me and Nico," I hastily said, slapping my hand over Benny's mouth as if he just cursed in front of a toddler. "I'm not telling anyone except you. If other people knew..." The thought of Sofia knowing... of Rachel, Leo and Parker knowing... of the whole school, my family, the *world* ?

The thought made the bile rise up in my throat.

"I'm not... I'm not ready," I whispered, Benny casting a concerned look from above my hand clamped over his mouth. Pushing my hand away from his mouth gently, Benny gave me a small smile.

"Yeah, sorry. Message received loud and clear, Wes. If you're not going to come out officially, you just have to be straight forward and, you know, tell Sofia that you're not into her... or any girls for that matte- OW." Benny winced when I punched him in the arm, rubbing at the spot as he sent me an "I'm kidding" stare.

"I already know that I have to tell her, Benny. It's just... a matter of how and when," I sighed, Benny nodding.

"Well, school's starting up again soon. She can't really avoid you when we have to go to school..."

"Yeah," I replied, nodding. "That just leaves the 'how', I suppose."

"Ack, worry about that another day," Benny said, kicking the game controller in front of me. "We've had enough deep and meaningful talks today, my brain's all tired from processing anything. To be honest, I'm still processing the whole Nico thing. I mean, you slept with hi- OW. WES. I GET IT," Benny hissed, rolling his eyes despite the goofy grin spread across his face. "Damn, my arm's gonna be all bruised now."

As I threatened to kick Benny again, my phone buzzed on the ground beside me. A sense of dread washed over my, pooling in my gut. Benny peered at the screen curiously, leaning over my shoulder to see it as the screen flickered on.

"Is it your *boooooyfriend* ?" Benny sung, my cheeks flaming at the term that I hadn't dared coin our... relationship.

"No, it's... oh-"

"Shit," Benny finished for me, his mouth popping open as soon as Sofia's name appeared on the screen. Flicking down the notification for her message, Benny and I discreetly read its contents without opening it completely.

Sofia - 5:44pm

Hey Wes, I just got back from Europe
(And finally got wifi lmao)
Hope your holiday has been good

Sofia - 5:45pm

But knowing u, u probs studied hard lol
Can't wait to see u at school next week!!
I've missed u heaps <3

"She's not even using all caps and her message scares me," Benny said, shivering a little. "Why does her heart terrify me, man?"

"If she scares you imagine how she makes me feel!" I groaned, Benny patting my back solemnly. "Should I just, you know, message her that I don't feel *that* way about her?"

"Let her down fast and hard? I say go for it, be a douche," Benny said, nodding firmly.

"A douc- you know what, maybe I'll just message her that we need to talk," I said, Benny rolling his eyes. "What? Isn't 'need to talk' code for 'our relationship has serious issues'?"

"Oh, so you guys are in a relationship now?" Benny replied, nose crinkling like he smelled something bad.

"You know that's not what I mean! I just... *fine!* We'll do it your way," I said, Benny's eyes widening as he leapt up again to drape his head over my shoulder.

"Good plan, good plan! Hurry and message her and end it, once and for all, and then you can get back to your regularly scheduled booty call with Nico- OW! Damn, I thought we were over the brotherly abuse schtick, Wes!"

"Not until you get over the idiotic brother schtick, Benny," I replied, rolling my eyes. Sofia's message floated in my vision, my finger hovering over the message, not having the courage to open it.

"Jesus, Wes, just open the bloody message. Here, I'll help~"

"Benny! I'm not ready- *ohmyfuckinggodyouopenedit!* " Screaming internally, I momentarily blacked out as Sofia's message expanded, filling the entire screen with the foreboding white light of death. "Benny what do I do! Ohhhh my God, what do I do. *She knows that I've seen it oh my God.* " Fumbling with my phone, I threw it behind me into Benny's lap, covering my pale face with my hands, eyes peeking through between my trembling fingers.

"Benny, you reply to her, I can't do it," I pleaded, Benny letting out a slow, deep chuckle.

"I will gladly do it, my friend. Hard and fast, heh."Benny's fingers clacked over the screen, before suddenly halting. His cheeks slowly growing redder and redder, Benny finally looked up sheepishly, throwing my phone back to me.

"What, Benny?"

Benny chuckled a little, scratching the back of his neck.

"Yeah... it's kind of hard to... you know... let her down hard. Maybe we should go with your plan? You know, with the code thing."

"Benny, you're such a- never mind," I said, gritting my teeth as Benny just looked at me weakly. "I'll just... tell her we need to talk. It's better to do this kind of thing in person, right?"

"Yep, definitely better," Benny said, nodding enthusiastically, as if he didn't think it was a bad plan just moments ago. "If you want, I can hang out with you in the background? As moral support."

" *Thanks* , Benny," I said, eyes swirling for the umpteenth time. "But I got this."

At least, I hope I do.

"No problem," Benny said, mouth grinning again. "Anything for my bro."

"Shut up, you ass," I mumbled, shaking my head, though my lips twitched with the beginnings of a smile as well.

"You love ass, don't lie to me," Benny snickered, yelping as he darted away from my projectile foot.

"Benny, please just shut up and start the game again before I kill you."

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Nico's front door was already unlocked when I arrived later that night, the thought of him anticipating my arrival sending a warm feeling pooling in
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my gut, though when I saw him I gave him a good scolding about the dangers of leaving the door unlocked. Nico silenced me with a quick peck on the lips swiftly after, grinning wolfishly as he dipped his index finger into the pasta sauce he was watching simmer on the stove.

"Have a taste?" he asked, pressing the saucy finger against my bottom lip.

Don't blush, don't blush, don't blush.

"Oh? Your cheeks are red, Wes. What kind of naughty things are you thinking about?" Nico teased, pressing his finger at the tight line between my upper and lower lips, playfully trying to gain entrance.

Dammit, I blushed.

"I'm not blu- mmph," I started to whine, Nico's finger using the opportunity to slip between my lips. The strong taste of tomato and herbs bathed my mouth, also a little creamy and warm. Very, very warm, in fact, as my whole face grew as red as the sauce as Nico's finger stroked my tongue, which instinctively curled around the probing digit. Holding back a moan as Nico bit his lip, lip ring glinting, I reeled my head back, Nico's finger releasing from my mouth with a slick pop.

Nico's blue eyes lit up with amusement as I coughed a little, wiping the globule of drool hanging from my lower lip with the back of my hand.

"So? How did it taste? Sweet, salty... *spicy* ?"

"Definitely *not* spicy," I spat, pressing my hands against my cheeks in an effort to cool them, though my hands were hot as the heat inside me began to spread to other parts of my body.

Humming, Nico dipped his finger back into the pot, popping it into his mouth. Nico, as always, did not miss the opportunity to tease me, slowly pulling his finger out as he locked his eyes with mine, cheeks pulling tight as he fought a grin as his tantalising motions made me gulp audibly.

"Really? I think it's a little spicy," Nico said, chuckling low and deep, as he took a step towards me. Stepping back, Nico laughed again, taking one large step forwards to press me against the kitchen counter, arms trapping me from the side as the edge of the table bit into my lower back. No room for my arms anywhere but against Nico's chest, I looked up at him, licking my lips once in anticipation and want. Laughing once more, a little lighter this time, Nico indulged me and my silent request, leaning down to press a lingering kiss on my mouth. Warm and sweet, I melted against Nico's touch like putty.

"You're right," I sighed against Nico's mouth, sliding my arms up to hanging them over his hunched shoulders. "Maybe a little spicy."

"Still tasty though?" Nico asked, wiggling a brow as he pulled back after pecking my lips again.

"Don't ask me questions you already know the answer to," I said, hitting his chest once before reaching behind me on the counter to the bag of salt sitting there. "But it does need a little more salt."

"Mhmm, I thought so too, babe," Nico said, the bag of salt falling from my hands and onto the ground.

Babe.

"What?" I asked, voice small and a little breathless. Nico just looked at me, a little confused with maybe even a pinch of concern in his gaze. Grasping my wrist, Nico flipped my hands over and ran his fingers across their surface, as if checking for any wounds or injuries that may have made me drop the salt, which lazily spilled from the upturned opening into a pile of white between our feet.

"What's wrong, Wes? You're worrying me a little," Nico admitted, dark brow furrowing.

"What did you say?" I whispered again, swallowing thickly.

"What did I- I asked if you were okay?" Nico asked again, voice curling up in confusion. "Wes, wait, wait, wait, are you crying?"

"Huh? I'm not..." I started, now the one looking at the other in confusion. Taking one of my hands from his, I brushed my fingers across my cheek, releasing them from my skin with a damp sheen on them.

"Wes, what's wrong, are you feeling sick? Did you eat something weird at Benny's?" Nico asked, now pressing his hand against my stomach, his touch searing.

"N-No, I'm not feeling... not feeling sick... But you just..." I mumbled, words catching in my throat.

Babe.

"Me?" Nico asked, eyebrows burrowing even deeper into his handsome face.

"You... You called me... B-babe," I managed to choke out, Nico's face faltering for a moment as he looked at me with the strangest of expressions.

Oh God. It was a mistake, wasn't it. He didn't mean to call me that *, he doesn't want me to think that I-*

"Wait, that's it?" Nico asked, covering his mouth as his shoulders began to shake. "You're crying because I gave you a pet name?" Seeing my flabbergasted and panicked expression, Nico couldn't contain his laughter any more and engulfed me in a suffocating hug, his hysterics muffled by my shoulder. When he finally began to calm down, almost with tears in his eyes himself, Nico captured my cheeks in his hands, sighing heavily.

"Damn, if you hate the name so much that you cried, you should choose another one before this sticks," Nico said, thumbs rubbing at the sticky tears beneath them.

"That's not..." I started, Nico raising an eye brow. Swallowing, I closed my eyes briefly to gather my thoughts and my wits.

"What is it then?" Nico asked leaning in a little closer, his forehead brushing against mine.

"It's just that... calling me... *that* ... might make me imagine things," I mumbled, sniffling. Nico's head cocked to the side, confusing clouding his expression again.

"Imagine things? What things?"

"U-Um... imagine that you might... kind of... like me? N-Not that I *actually* think you do, because, you're, you know... you." I squeaked out, eyes jamming shut as the words left my mouth. My heart hammered, battering against my rib cage so much so that I was sure Nico could feel it. Though my heart was screaming, the air was silent around us, as Nico barely even moved, though the fingers around my waist twitched just slightly.

After a few moments too long, Nico loosed a breath, air moving past my cheek. As a caress or a slap, I couldn't tell, at least, until Nico's arms tightened, crushing me to his chest. His body rumbled as he spoke in my ear, his lip ring a little cold on my lobe.

"Damn, *babe* . You're really fucking dense."

A/N: Phew, managed to finish writing this before the end of the day! Thanks so much to those who have commented and voted for this story - by no means do you have to, but it's always really heart warming when someone engages with my story :) Hope you enjoyed this chapter, and hopefully I can get the next one out on time as well! xx

THIRTY-SIX

Dense ?

"Dense?" I asked, pushing against Nico's chest, though it took all of my strength to move far away enough to just see his face. Surprisingly, there was a soft smile on his face, though his eyes may have glimmered with a little disappointment, making my stomach roll.

"Super dense," Nico said, bumping my forehead with his. "You know, you're supposed to be really smart, but sometimes I swear you're stupid as hell."

"Says the one who repeated a year!" I retorted, my pride a little bruised after his jab. "And who was it that wrote our whole bio report that got an A+ from Ms. Levenson? Definitely *not* you!"

"Hey, hey, I'm not saying that you're, you know, academically dumb," Nico said, pinching my sides affectionately. "Just think about something for a second, babe."

Babe.

Dropping that single syllable silenced me, my head spinning.

Babe, babe, babe. He's said it three times now. Slipping it once is an accident, twice is a joke. Three times? What did that mean?

Nico chuckled at my reaction, snapping me out of my daze. Clearing my throat, I frowned as I peered up at Nico, who had started rubbing lazy circles with his thumbs at my hip.

"Th-Think about what?" I asked, Nico laughing.

"So we've had sex," Nico said bluntly, making me choke on air. "Multiple times."

"Y-Yeah?" I replied, averting my gaze from Nico's, cheeks flaming.

"And we've been on dates," Nico continued, my head whirling around, mouth popping open.

"Date? When the heck have we been on a date?" I asked, genuinely taken aback. Nico's smile faltered, his frown mirroring mine as his fingers stopped circling my waist. A speckle of guilt that arose from somewhere I couldn't pinpoint sprouted inside me at his expression. Sighing, Nico released one of his hands from my side to trap my head to avoid me looking away.

"How many times have I cooked for you? The rooftop picnic? Any of this ring a bell?"

Cooking for me... he counts that as a date? I thought that was just... two guys eating together. Does he not eat with all those girls he always had draped over his arm?

"I-I can't remember how many times..." I replied honestly, Nico's frown disappearing as he nodded.

"Which means a lot, doesn't it?"

"I guess so..."

"And how many times have I driven you to school?" Nico questioned, eyes alight under the ceiling lights.

"Many times...?"

"Have you ever seen me driving people to school before?"

Have I? To be honest... I never really saw him at school before in the first place. It's only this year that he's been attending properly, and for a lot of that he has been the one to drive me to school.

"I don't think so," I replied, voice weak and unsure. Nico didn't say anything, and just smiled as he pressed a small kiss to the corner of my

mouth.

"And who do I always call the moment I wake up?"

Who...?

"Who do I let drag me out of bed at ungodly hours in the morning, even when I just want to sleep?"

Maybe...

"And who did I punch one of my close friends for?"

Don't tell me...

"Wesley Dillon," Nico said, leaning in close as his voice dropped to a mere whisper.

"Yes?" I breathed back in kind, vision growing glossy again as Nico kissed the other corner of my mouth, lips lingering as he asked me a final question.

"Who do you think that is?"

Dense. Really, really fucking dense. Even I couldn't be that dense, even I had to know exactly who he was talking about.

If any one knew more than I did, it was Nico himself. The person who knew me better than I did myself.

"I think it's me," I choked out, Nico chuckling as he kissed me square on the lips, humming in satisfaction.

"Don't just think, idiot," Nico laughed, pulling my body up so I was sitting on the counter, arms wrapped around his neck and legs around his middle. Looking up at me now, Nico peppered kisses over my face, likely tasting the saltiness of my tears against my flesh.

"B-But..."

" *Babe* ," Nico said, the expression on his face telling me that he knew *exactly* what that name did to me. "I like you. I like you a whole lot. I really, *really* fucking like you. Fuck, I think," Nico snorted at his words, looking me in the eye as he rubbed away the tears from my face. "No, Wes, I *know* I really fucking love you."

Love me. He loves me. Nico Beckett loves me. Nico-fucking-Beckett actually...

Really...

Fucking...

Loves. Me.

"I really fucking love you too, you asshole," I wailed, burying my face in his chest as he laughed, running his fingers through my hair as he cradled my head in his chest.

"I know," Nico said, a light pressure spreading on the crown of my head as he pressed his lips there. Inhaling deeply, Nico's embrace tightened around my frame, as if he couldn't bring me quite as close as he wanted to. "I've known for a while now, but it's nice to hear you say it." Hearing this, I sniffled loudly and wiped my remaining tears using the front of Nico's shirt, moving to look at him properly, lips trembling slightly but still managing to pout.

"If you knew, then you should have said something!" I complained, cheeks flaming from both emotional exertion and embarrassment. Surprisingly, Nico averted his gaze first, pressing his face against my chest this time as he hugged me tightly. He didn't say anything, his breaths steady against my chest, though his arms kept tightening and tightening, until his grip was on the verge of being painful. Moving my hand to gently rest on the top of his head, fingers running through thick black tendrils, I nudged Nico to speak. "Nico?"

"It's... not a simple thing to say," Nico said slowly, his head not moving from my chest, his face still obscured from view. "And I was still figuring

things out. Wes... I know that I've... *been,* with a few people before," Nico continued, my fingers stopping their motion through his hair. Sensing me stop, Nico interrupted his words to look up, taking my hand from his hair in his and pressing it to his lips.

"Wait until I finish, okay?" Nico asked, mouth moving against the back of my hand. Nico only continued speaking when I nodded, though he didn't let go of my hand. Instead, he started at it - at both our entwined hands - and smiled to himself.

"I've been with people, quite a few, I guess, but you're the first..." Nico spoke, fingers tracing patterns into my palm, tough light and delicate. "Until you, I didn't know the difference between sex and actually liking someone. I told you that I slept with you that first night out of curiosity, well, that was true. I was curious, about how it would feel to sleep with another guy... And then you fell into my lap. Or stumbled, really. You were pretty wasted."

"It may not have been me, though," I said quietly, turning away a little as I nibbled on my lower lip. "It could have been someone else. I didn't have to be me, did it?"

"No, it didn't," Nico replied honestly, my heart aching as I imagined someone else stumbling into that particular room on that particular night. I pictured someone else drunkenly piling into Nico's car, falling onto his sheets. Someone else under him, kissing him, being *with* him.

Why me?

"Why you?" Nico said, his words mirroring mine. Eyes rounded and snapping back to his, Nico's lips curled into a smirk as he ran his finger up the heart line on my palm, slowly meandering down my life line until he reached my wrist, right on the spot where my pulse was thundering beneath my skin. "Your face is really so honest, I can tell exactly what you're thinking, Wes."

"Shut up," I replied, covering my face with my free arm. Nico laughed, the finger on my wrist moving back up until all his fingers wound around mine.

"Why you though... that's what I was trying to figure out. Sleeping with you that night was... exciting. New. And to top it off, our bodies were really compatible," Nico said, making me blush up to my ears, making Nico chuckle. "That night was so good, it made me curious about trying it with other guys. I mean, the feelings I got when sleeping with different girls were never that different from one another, so why would it be different with guys?"

Oh.

"Babe, babe, don't look so sad," Nico hurriedly said, kissing my mouth that had slowly begun to droop. "Wait until I finish, Wes."

"Mm-kay," I murmured against his mouth, Nico giving me another brief kiss in response.

"Good. Anyway, I kept telling myself that I'd, you know, try it with other guys to confirm if I was really bi, or gay, or something in-between. But... somewhere along the way, that interest just... disappeared. To be honest, it not only disappeared, but actually repulsed me. It didn't take me long to realise that it was because of you."

"Me?"

"Yeah, you," Nico said, rolling his eyes, though his smile remained. "After spending time with you, I didn't want any one else. Why would I even look at someone else, when all I wanted was to spend time with you? Somehow, you were special." My heart swelled with Nico's words, his bright blue eyes piercing me deep and sharp. Nico was saying everything that I had longed to hear since I realised my feelings for him. He's saying that I'm special, that I'm not like his other flings. That I'm *not* a fling, period. He's saying everything that I wanted him to say, and yet part of me just...

"I don't believe you," I said, shaking my head. "I'm not... I'm not *special.* I mean, you're Nico Beckett, and I'm just me. You said our bodies are... compatible. What's to say that that's all there is?"

"Wes, really?" Nico groaned, pressing his forehead against mine again, his voice weathered thin with frustration. "Wes, you make me do things I've never even thought of doing before. I invited you to my house, I've cooked for you, I've taken you to places I've never taken people before. I fall asleep thinking about you, I dream about you, and I wake up missing you. Good sex isn't what makes me constantly worry about you and constantly want to be with you. Us being 'compatible' isn't what makes me smile like a fucking sap every time something I see reminds me of you. Wes, good sex isn't going to make me start grinning every time I see a bean sprout. That's. All. You. You infuriate me, make me mad, make me worry, but bloody hell do you make me really fucking happy. I probably can't even say why that is, but just being around you makes me so happy I don't even know what to do. God, if you don't believe me then tell me what I have to do to prove it to you. I've never... done all that romantic shit before, but if you need me to recite sonnets and fucking bring you flowers then I will, as long as it gets the message through to your thick skull that I really bloody love you."

Nico's chest heaved as he rambled on and on, barely taking a breath between sentences before the next one began.

"Oh," was all I managed to get out, Nico's declaration of love eating away at my brain, which was spinning and dizzy as it tried to digest everything that the man in front of me just said.

"Oh? That's all you have to say?" Nico asked, chuckling despite his breathlessness.

He loves me. He really loves me.

I think I can start to believe that he really loves me.

Clearing my throat, I reached out to place my hand over Nico's, a smile beginning to grow on my face.

"Well... I'll give a hard pass on the sonnets and flowers... but dinner would be a nice start," I said, Nico laughing as he scooped me off the counter, kissing me deeply.

"I think I can make that happen," Nico said, gently dropped me to the salt-covered ground. Smirking a little as Nico turned to the long-forgotten pot of sauce, I snaked my arms around his back, pressing my face between his shoulder blades.

"Don't just think, idiot."

A/N: Thanks for reading! :)

THIRTY-SEVEN

"Babe," Nico said, grinning when he saw the expression on my face reflected in the car window at the pet name. "Do you want me to park here? Or at the gate?"

"Hm... gate's fine," I replied, turning to him. Nico nodded, smile widening when I slowly reached across the centre console of his car to take his hand. My *boyfriend's* hand.

The thought made my stomach flip and my cheeks heat, making me turn my head away from Nico again to try and hide the embarrassingly happy smile on my own face. Ever since we both confirmed our mutual feelings for each other, it seemed that neither of us could suppress the incredulous, syrupy smiles on our faces, despite our best efforts to convince the other that we were calm. The rest of the holiday had passed by in a blur, with me spending time with Nico whenever he was off work. In the bubble of our first official week as boyfriends, I had managed to push aside the nagging problem of Sofia from my mind.

However, school was back, and so was Sofia.

Finding a park somewhat close to the gate, Nico and I ignored the curious glances from other students as he got out of the car, me following close behind him. Although our relationship had become official between the two of us, I wasn't too eager to make it official to everyone else. Benny finding out almost gave me a myocardial infarction, I could only imagine what would happen to my heart if the rest of the student body found out. Nico had playfully scrunched up his nose and joked about how he's going to miss out on kissing me in places other than the secluded pool shed, but the knowing gleam in his eye and the tender arm around my body told me that he'd protect me and my wishes, until I no longer wished it.

Nearing the front gate, I nearly dropped my bag and my body onto the ground as a high velocity projectile slammed into my back, a flurry of arms

and loud, enthusiastic screaming.

"Mooooorning, Wes-oo-lee!" Benny cackled, attempting to plant a kiss on my cheek, which I fended off for my life. Glancing sideways as Nico, who was just watching us with amusement on his face, I turned my attention back to Benny and shoved him off, stepping a little closer to Nico. The backs of our hands brushed, Nico letting out a slight chuckle as Benny wiggled his brow, making me flush. Benny, looking at the taller man behind me, gave a small salute alongside a wide smile. "Morning, Nico."

"Mornin', Benny," Nico said, nodding in return. Dropping his voice and leaning his body closer, his torso pressing against my shoulder, Nico spoke. "Thanks for, you know, accepting us."

Us.

"No, no, thank *you* for accepting Wes," Benny said, pretending to tear up. "I thought he'd be single forever. Ack, just thinking about it makes me want to cry."

"Shut up, Benny," I groaned, kicking him in the shin. Wobbling forward, Benny sucked in his cry of pain as Nico snorted, discreetly tickling the palm of my hand with his hand. Moving the conversation on to more mundane topics, the three of us meandered through the throng of students in the halls, conversations bouncing off the walls as people chatted about their holidays. Girls screamed and hugged their besties as if they hadn't seen them in years, studious students were comparing the number of practise exams they completed in the past few weeks, and others were simply looking like they had the life sucked out of them the moment they stepped onto school grounds. Reaching our lockers, Benny and I grabbed our books for the day's classes while Nico simply leaned against the lockers, fingers reaching into his pocket for a cigarette.

Putting the cigarette between his lips, I rolled my eyes, plucking it with my thumb and forefinger and pointedly throwing it in the bin a metre away from us. Nico gave me a pointed look, but just let out a frustrated breath when I returned his look without flinching, his hands shoving the packet of cigarettes back into his pants.

"Good boy," I said, smirking as Nico did my bidding. Nico tried to keep a straight face, but couldn't suppress the smile from gracing his plush lips.

"Only for you," Nico said, voice dropping to a whisper again, " *babe* ." Shaking my head, I moved to grab a few more books from my school bag, when I felt Nico stiffen beside me. Looking up at him, a frown beginning to brew, I saw his eyes trained on something in the distance, his mouth set in a hard line. Benny, sensing me falter, followed our gazes as well, swearing under his breath when he saw what we were staring at.

Sofia .

Gulping and eyes widened to saucers, I felt my body freeze as she began to walk closer. Parker flanked her left, and Rachel on her right, the three of them locked in conversation. Sofia's light, airy laugh flitted down the hall above the cacophony of noise in the hallway, making the hairs on the back of my neck stand erect. As they grew closer, Nico casually stepped around my body, pushing me around the end of the lockers, hiding me from view. Benny, seeing Nico move, also coughed and awkwardly pretended that he didn't see anything, giving Sofia and the others a wide smile as they approached.

Sofia, knowing where my locker was, looked at the area wide-eyed when she saw Nico standing there, leaning against it with a hard expression on his face. Rachel and Parker both looked at Nico, Rachel visibly paling and Parker swallowing thickly. Sofia, after collecting herself, turned to Benny with a strained smile.

"Hey Benny! Hope you had a great holiday!" Sofia chirped, voice sickly sweet. "Have you seen Wes?"

"Wes?!" Benny asked, voice a little louder than appropriate, his voice cracking at the end. Sofia gave him a quizzical look, Benny covering up his nervousness with a forced laugh, scratching the back of his neck. "Oh, he, uh, went to the bathroom. You know, so he doesn't have to go during class. Because he doesn't want to miss anything, if he, um, has to pee. Yeah. Ha."

"Oh," Sofia said, face falling. Fiddling with the end of her plait, Sofia brightened up again, hefting her schoolbag higher on her shoulders. "That's okay, I'll catch him during lunch then. See you later, Benny!"

"Y-Yeah, see you later," Benny said, Parker patting him on the shoulder in greeting as Rachel managed to give him a wave, her eyes skittishly flickering to Nico as the group walked past. Plastering my body behind the row of lockers, I didn't dare move from my hiding spot until Nico's arm gestured for me to come out.

"Thanks, guys," I said, letting out my held breath.

"You're really gonna tell her today?" Nico asked, eyes not leaving Sofia's retreating form as she walked turned the corner.

"Yeah," I said, Nico staring at me as if he didn't believe the single word that came out of my mouth. "I really will, Nico. Just... not now. But definitely during lunch."

"And you're sure you don't want me to be there?" Nico asked, repeating a question he had asked me during the car ride to school. Nodding in response to his question, Nico sighed heavily, worry creasing his forehead. Glancing around and noticing that the halls had since emptied since the bell rang, Nico brushed his finger across my cheek, a soft smile on his face.

Benny, seeing the intimate motion, coughed and muttered a quick goodbye, before scuttling off to class, but not before shooting me a large heart with his arms when he stepped out of Nico's view. Ignoring my best friend, though my cheeks coloured a little, I looked into Nico's eyes, feeling myself calm in their blueness.

"Good luck for later, Wes," Nico said, hand dropping from my cheek. "If anything happens... if she doesn't take it well, call me straight away, okay?"

"What are you going to do?" I asked, laughing a little. "Beat her to a pulp? I heard that you're a gang leader and eat up low grade mobsters for breakfast." Nico snorted, shrugging his shoulders theatrically.

"Nah, I was thinking about something more along the lines of grabbing you and kissing you in front of her to claim that you're mine," Nico said, leaning down until his lips hovered dangerously close to mine.

"That would probably be worse than beating her to a pulp," I breathed, though Nico's words sent a jolt of warmth through my body.

"Hm, maybe," Nico admitted, eyes sparkling. "But definitely more satisfying."

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Foot tapping on the concrete, fingers nervously hovering over the message on my phone, I forced myself to take long, slow breaths as I waited.

Wesley - 11:23am
Hey Sofia
I need to talk to u about something
Meet me behind the caf at lunch?

Sofia - 11:49am
Of c!
I actually need to talk to u too :)

Talk? What does she need to talk to me about?

Sofia's foreboding words did nothing to help my nerves, which were tingling for all the wrong reasons.

"Wes!"

The tingling sensation immediately ceased as a wave of frost and nausea rolled over me, my core feeling numb as the sense of dread pounded harder and louder. Following soon after the voice, Sofia's vibrant rounded the corner, the girl's mouth pulled widely to the sides as she smiled. An excited squeal left that comically large smile as she leapt forwards, wrapping me in a tight hug. I closed my eyes as I willed the gag building in my throat to
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calm down as my nostrils were assaulted by her sickeningly sweet perfume and the feeling of her chest pressed tightly against mine.

Squirming, I pried myself away from her grip, taking a startled step back. Sofia either didn't get offended by my actions, or pretended she didn't notice the way I backed away from her like he were the walking black plague, and just fiddled with the end of her braid coyly.

Just tell her. Just end it. Hard and fast.

"Sofia, I know that you-"

Bzzz bzzz... bzzz bzzz...

My phone vibrated in my pocket, and the moment of hesitation in Sofia's body when she felt it through my pant pocket allowed me to once again escape her grasp. Chest heaving, I fumbled with the phone, pressing it to my ear.

"Wes," Nico's voice drawled, the low timbre followed by the sound of him inhaling, a cigarette likely perched on his lips as he spoke. "How's 'The Talk' going? Shit, I'm assuming." The hiccuped noise that left my mouth made Nico laugh, the single sound confirming his statement. From behind me, I heard Sofia let out a disgruntled huff. Sparing her a glance, I saw her face stiffly twisted into a suppressed scowl as she stared at me, brown eyes dark. Swallowing thickly, I turned away again, pressing my phone closer to my face.

"Really shit," I whispered back to Nico, who let out a knowing grunt in return.

"Yeah, I figured," Nico said, sighing. "Called you to give you a pep talk."

"Did you?" I answered, my melting.

"Yep. So, you know, good luck. You can do it, I believe in you, et cetera, et cetera," Nico said, his words nonchalant but the tone full of warmth. "If she

interrupts you, just keep talking. If she talks over you, just talk louder. And if she tries to touch you..." Nico's voice dropped to a growl, making me shiver. "Then call me and I'll *deal* with her."

"A little late for that," I thought to myself, smiling nonetheless at Nico's words.

"Thanks, Nico, but I got this," I said, spirits bolstering with Nico's support.

"Sure. See you soon then, babe."

Hanging up the phone, I filled my lungs with the crisp midday air, before turning back to Sofia. Large brown eyes narrowed themselves in my direction, though her lips held the wisps of an unsettling smile, one that seemed to hide a raging storm beneath calm waters.

"Who was that on the phone?" Sofia asked sweetly, hands clasped behind her back as she rocked back and forth on her heels.

My boyfriend.

The thought made me grin a little, and Sofia's smile cracked a little. Before she could speak, I opened my mouth, stomach clenching in a fist as I forced out the words that were heavy in my throat.

"Look, Sofia," I said, voice surprisingly steady. "I know that you have feelings for me, and I'm really flattered, but I don't see you in the same way. I'm, um, happy if we just remain friends though."

"Huh?" Sofia spluttered, dumbfounded. Her doe-eyes blinked rapidly as her brain tried to process my words, her face flickering between different expressions like a computer whose screen kept blinking after its circuits had fried. Seeing her reaction, I couldn't help but mutter a small "sorry" under my breath, as if that would do a lot of good. The word was like putting a bandaid over an amputation site - stupid and severely inadequate.

"What do you mean *"you don't feel the same way,"* Sofia churned out, her teeth grinding together. The audible crunching of enamel made me wince,

my hairs bristling at the grating noise.

"I mean exactly what I said, Sof. I don't like you... romantically," I said, the words awkward against my cheeks.

"You're lying," Sofia said, voice firm, as her muscles tugged at her lips in another forced smile. "Wes, you're lying. If you're trying to joke around with me, it's *not funny* ."

If it's not funny, then don't smile like that.

"I'm not, Sofia. I know I may have... led you on... but I'm not really, um, experienced with this sort of thing, so I guess I didn't know how to react when you... you know... flirted with me," I said, face a little hot. "Um, but I've recently realised that I don't like you that way."

" *Who is she?* " Sofia seethed, eyes sharp. "Who's the bitch that took you from me?"

"What?" I exclaimed, my turn to be shocked. Sofia let out shrill sound as she stormed towards me, grabbing me by the front of my shirt. There were tears in her eyes, though her face held no sadness. Fury. There was only fury and jealousy present on her face, and it was terrifying. No longer was there the sweet, slightly shy girl who fiddled with the end of her braid when she felt embarrassed. Instead, there was a livid, woman who looked like she could kill if her last thread was snapped.

I didn't want to snap it, but unfortunately, it seems like I unwittingly already had.

"Tell me, Wes!" Sofia screeched, shaking me by my jumper. Her nails bit into my chest, painful and sharp. " *Tell me!* "

"Sofia!" I yelled, grabbing her wrists and wrenching her off me. "The hell are yo- No one stole me from you! I was never yours to begin with, I'm-"

Slap.

My face smarted, my eyes tearing up as the sting radiated across the left side of my face. Sofia's red-palmed hand hovered in the air, her tears long-dried and my words dancing in her ears. Mouth open, Sofia looked like she was about to say something, but instead pressed her lips into a hard line and turned on her heel. Her lips didn't say anything, but her eyes did.

She definitely wasn't finished with this.

With *me* .

A/N: Phew, I just finished writing this chapter in time :') School's back for me (AKA I'm back in Hell) so I apologise in advanced if chapters are delayed. I'll try my hardest to get them out as soon as possible! Thanks for reading~

THIRTY-EIGHT

I slumped in the passenger seat of Nico's car, fingers tapping restlessly on the edge of the door as I waited for Nico to return. His tall form soon emerged from behind the sliding doors of the supermarket, a bag of frozen peas under his arm. Getting in, he quickly pressed it against my red and burning cheek. With his extended hand, he brushed a few stray hairs from my face, before gently caressing my hand that supported the icy package on my face.

"Thanks," I mumbled, Nico managing a small smile as he gently peeled the ice away from my cheek after a few minutes. Pinching my chin with his fingers, he gently turned my head to the side before running his index finger along the red palm-shaped mark on my face.

"How's it looking?" I asked, Nico humming.

"Looks less like 'I got slapped by a raging psycho bitch' and more 'I got slapped by a bitch' now," Nico said, making me snort lightly.

"Still obvious that I got slapped then?"

"Just keep the peas on it for a bit longer. It should be alright by the time I get you home," Nico said, taking my hand and forcing it to press the iced bag against my face again. The drive home was quiet, but not uncomfortable; my mind was preoccupied with the mess that was my 'relationship' with Sofia. At every few red lights, Nico would softly ask to see my cheek, making a teasing comment every time. Thought his words were light-hearted, the tremor of anger and concern in his surveying eyes made my heart warm.

Sooner than I would have liked, I found myself parked in front of my house, not quite wanting to go in. Nico sensed my reluctance, and just chuckled under his breath. The peas I held against my face had long since turned lukewarm, Nico plucking them from my fingers, throwing them

carelessly onto the dashboard before cupping my face in his hands. He gave me a soft, lingering kiss, murmuring that he'll miss me too, even though I never said the words aloud. Pouting a little as he released me from his hands, Nico just rolled his eyes as he handed me my backpack from the backseat, before giving me the softened bag of peas.

"The redness has gone down, but it might be a bit sore for a bit longer," Nico said, almost sounding apologetic as he saw the calming pinkness on my cheek.

"Sounds like you know from experience," I teased, happiness bubbling when I saw Nico's worried frown disappear from my quip.

"If you ever get punched in the face, I can tell you how that's like as well," Nico said, eyes alight. "I remember a certain someone punched me right here..." Nico tickled the angle of his jaw with his finger, making me flush.

"I apologised for that, didn't I?!" I groaned, Nico shrugging his shoulders, feigning obliviousness.

"Did you? I can't quite remember," Nico said, making me puff my cheeks out, which only made him let out a coddling sound and pinch my uninjured cheek. "Cute."

"I'm not *cute* ," I whined, voice warbled from Nico's squeezing. Seeing that Nico wasn't going to stop squeezing my cheek any time soon, I flicked at his wrist, making him drop his arm reluctantly. "Great, now my *other* cheek is red."

"At least it's symmetrical now," Nico laughed as I shook my head, grinning.

"Shut up, Nico. I'll see you tomorrow," I said, squeezing his hand before turning towards my home.

"Yeah, see you-" Nico said, voice dropping a little after the words before finishing his sentence, "-babe."

'Goddammit , when will I get used to him calling me that?' I groaned to myself as I let myself in. Shaking my head and the giddiness in my stomach away, I kicked off my shoes and dumped my schoolbag on the ground.

"Mum, I'm home," I called, loosening my school's striped tie and hanging my blazer onto the coat rack by the door. Unlike normal, no response came from the kitchen, and I furrowed my brow in confusion. "Mum?"

"Welcome home, kiddo," a deep voice called from the archway joining the foyer to the lounge room. Mouth popping open in surprise, I turned towards the familiar voice, a smile already on my face before I saw the figure standing there.

"Dad! You're back!" I laughed, rushing over to give the man a hug. "It's been ages!" The man chuckled as he hugged me back, giving me two heavy-handed pats on the back. It had been a long time since I had last seen my dad, since he worked out of town and could only come back when his company let him take leave, which wasn't often. It had been a few months at least, maybe almost half a year, since I had seen him last and he looked different. An older man, I had remembered him having hair that were greying at the roots and deeply set wrinkles on his forehead. Now, his hair was coloured a rich brown, much like my own natural colour, and he had lost a little weight in his face which made his strong jaw structure catch the light. Glancing at his clothes, I was surprised to see that he was wearing a dress shirt and dark jeans that looked crisp and new. Dad had never really been one with great fashion sense - it clearly runs in the family, at least down the male line - and had a closet that really only consisted of worn, baggy jeans and well-worn T-shirts. Seeing him wearing something so refined made me almost do a double take.

"Yeah, I know, Wes," dad said, seeming to not notice my staring, only ruffling my hair happily. "Did you get taller? I swear you weren't taller than me the last time I saw you!"

"Dad, I stopped growing ages ago," I laughed, shaking my head as dad nodded, rubbing his chin as he thought to himself. "Anyway, when did you get back? I didn't think you'd be back until my graduation or something."

"Ah, I got back around lunch time," dad said, shrugging nonchalantly. "I managed to get some time off work, so I figured I could make a quick trip down for the rest of the week. Catch up with you, you know?"

As dad moved to ruffle my hair again, I saw Jamie begin to descend the stairs, her hair tied in a messy bun atop her head and a sour expression on her face.

"Hey, Jamie! Why didn't you message me that dad came home?" I asked, Jamie's lips pursing together as she gave a tired look. Stepping to my side, Jamie half hugged my shoulders, tugging me a little.

"Didn't see the point," Jamie said shortly, patting my shoulder before making her way to the kitchen, calling out to mum about something regarding dinner. Dad just sighed heavily, before patting me on the shoulder where Jamie had just tapped a few seconds before.

"Wes, come sit with me on the couch," dad said, nudging me towards the lounge. "Tell me about what's been going on with you. How's school? How's Benny? Do you have a girlfriend yet?"

Hearing the last question, I all about choked on my own breath, dad chuckling at my response.

"That reaction is suspicious!" dad exclaimed, clapping me on the back again. "So tell me, is she cute?"

"Dad, I don't have a girlfriend," I sighed, cheeks flushing.

I have a boyfriend.

"No need to be shy, Wes! Come on, tell me. Is she cute? I'm sure she is," dad pushed, eyes gleaming as he urged me to spill.

He's not cute, he's... handsome?

"Dad, I'm serious, I don't have a girlfriend," I pleaded, the man just giving me a look of disbelief and a knowing smile.

"Sure, sure," he said, getting up from the couch. "Anyway, go shower and get changed, Wes. Your mum should have dinner finished by the time you come down again." With that, my dad sauntered off up the stairs and into his office, closing the door behind him. Getting up to go shower myself, I noticed Jamie hanging around the entrance to the kitchen, her eyes staring at the stairs, arms crossed and eyes narrowed. Seeing me, Jamie's expression softened slightly, Jamie mouthing "go shower, you smell" before turning back towards the kitchen.

"Yeah, yeah," I muttered, rolling me eyes at my sister's cheap comment, heading upstairs to shower. As I walked upstairs, the air seemed to get a little cooler, a dull throb of wariness settling inside me as the constant ache of the issue with Sofia once again permeated through my mind.

Don't worry about it for now, Wes. Just relax at home. If you can't relax here, then where could you go?

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"Wes, can you pass the mashed potatoes?" Jamie asked, mouth half full with roast beef drowned in gravy. I let out a disgusted noise as a little gravy dribbled from the corner of her mouth and onto the front of her tank top.

"Why're you asking me?" I asked, glancing at dad who was sitting a little closer to the mashed potatoes. "I can hardly reach them too, you know? And you dropped some gravy on your shirt, you animal."

"Oh, shit," Jamie cursed, wiping the gravy droplet with her thumb and sticking it into her mouth. Groaning at my sister's habits, I leaned over the table to push the bowl of mashed potatoes towards her, struggling to do so myself. Mum just glanced at Jamie, her face neutral as she pushed a few peas around on her plate mindlessly. Seeing that Jamie was just being her usual slob-like self, mum turned back to her plate, stabbing a single pea and popping it into her mouth. Her face tightened a little as it seemed like she was forcing herself to swallow, but the expression soon passed. As I opened my mouth to ask her what was wrong, Jamie piped up, scratching at the dark spot on her shirt.
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"Wes, pass me the napkins," Jamie ordered, licking her thumb to dampen it and apply some moisture to the dried gravy. Looking around the table, I gave Jamie an incredulous look when I noticed the tray of napkins sitting by dad's elbow, almost across the table from me. Dad looked at Jamie silently, picking up the napkins to give to Jamie. The tray of napkins hovered in the air, which suddenly chilled as Jamie pointedly looked away from him, losing interest in the stain on her shirt and more on the wall in front of her. Mum wriggled in her seat, as if her chair was beginning to catch on fire and singe the back of her legs.

"Jamie, dad's passing you the napkins," I said, rolling me eyes. Jamie's mouth tightened into a line, before parting to push out some strained words.

"I'm not going to take anything from *him* ," she spat, making me flinch.

"What the hell, Jamie?" I asked quietly, blinking in disbelief as dad just lowered the napkins, his face not revealing if Jamie's harsh words made a mark on him.

"You heard me," Jamie said, turning to mum, whose face suddenly changed as she registered what was going on in her momentary daze.

"Jamie, calm down," mum pleaded, reaching over the table to rest her hand on Jamie's wrist. Jamie's eyes grew alight, locking eyes with mum as they seemed to have a silent discussion, the heat between them palpable. After a few moments, mum spoke again, voice cracking a little as her lip quivered. "Jamie, don't..."

"Mum," Jamie said, voice softening a little as the barbed wires in her throat eased slightly. The word was a single syllable, but seemed to speak something more, as mum bit on her lower lip, eyes dropping from Jamie's towards her almost full plate.

"Mum?" I asked, worry churning in my gut as I glanced around the table at the rest of my family, all of them having different expressions on their faces, none of which were confusion.

They know something. They know something that I don't.

"Mum?" I asked again, shaking her arm lightly. "What's going on?"

Mum turned to me, eyes glassy as she struggled to fight back tears. Seeing my mum like that made a painful feeling surge inside, my eyes wetting a little as my breathing quickened in anticipation.

"I'm sorry, Wes," mum whispered, not quite able to speak louder without bursting into tears. At mum's words, Jamie suddenly stood up from her chair, the force sending the flimsy piece of furniture falling backwards with a loud crash.

"Why are you apologising?" Jamie seethed, her voice growing in volume and anger as she slammed her fist against the table. "If anyone has to apologise, it's *him* ." Spitting out the last words, Jamie thrust an angry finger towards my father, who just sat there calmly, dabbing at his mouth with a napkin before placing it beside his plate. Jamie, seeing his almost eerily calm demeanour, scoffed bitterly. "You don't even have the decency to look guilty, huh."

Seeing as mum was barely able to keep herself together, I stood up as well, leaning against the table as Jamie turned to me, eyes begging me to ask her. Her mouth looked like it was dying to tell me, and all I had to do was ask.

So I did.

Jamie let out a tight breath, turning back to my dad with a complicated expression on her face. Mum quietly sobbed beside her, covering her face in her hands.

"Dad's been having an affair," Jamie said simply, her words empty. "All those business trips, those months away 'working'? Yeah, well, let's just say he was working hard at being a fucking bastard."

What?

"Jamie," dad said in warning, turning to his eldest daughter with a face simmering with anger. The look didn't phase Jamie in the slightest, my sister just laughing dryly.

"What? I can't call the piece of shit that cheated on my mum, on his *family* , a bastard? If you're not one, then what should I call you? A piece of worthless shit? An asshole? One thing I know is that I'm sure as hell not going to call you a father."

"What?" I croaked, throat dry as I glanced around the room, my confusion beginning to morph into understanding, which morphed into horror. Turning to my father, face twisted into shock, I struggled to find my breath and my words. "D-Dad... is it true...? It can't be..."

Dad didn't respond, only managing to look me in the eye briefly, before looking back down at the table. His response was all I needed to confirm Jamie's words, my legs buckling beneath me.

"Why?" I whimpered, turning to dad whose hands clenched beneath the table. His lack of a response made the heat in my chest flare, and I stepped forward, grabbing the man I called a father by the shoulders and shaking him with all the strength I had in my sinewy arms. "Why?! How could you do this to us... to mum. To me?"

"I was tired," dad said slowly, mum letting out another sob as Jamie stepped over to her, wrapping her arms around her trembling shoulders. "Tired of coming home from work and having someone nag to me about the bills, school fees, things that were falling apart in the house. I didn't need all that after working my ass off every day. I needed something else, and I found it, just... not *here* ," dad said, finally having some sense of decency to look uncomfortable.

"Then you should get out of *here* ," Jamie said quietly, giving dad a withering look. Only silence ensued, my mouth so dry that I couldn't get any words out even if I tried. The silence was broken by my mother's defeated voice speaking up, her neck labouring to lift her head as the weight on her shoulders threatened to submerge her. Looking her husband in the eye, mum swallowed thickly, Jamie's arms tightening around her.

"Jamie's right, Neil," mum said, voice scratching as she pushed the words out. "Frankly, I'm tired too. We deserve better than this. Better than *you* . So just *go* ."

Dad sat there, mum's words settling in his ear drums for a long moment, before he finally stood. Turning to me, he offered a pathetic smile, as if he hadn't single-handedly just ended the world I thought I knew, the world I thought was safe.

"Go," I said flatly, not managing to look at him. Dad's shoulders slumped slightly at my response, but he didn't say anything further, only murmuring something about having lawyers contact us to work out some 'details'. Divorce, no doubt. In a span of time that felt both long and short at the same time, dad's back disappeared behind the front door, which clicked behind him.

The three of us stood there - our incomplete, shattered family - before I hastily moved to grab my coat. Seeing me begin to put my shoes on, mum rushed forward, grabbing me by the arm.

"Wesley, Wesley," mum chanted quietly, moving to stand as well to pull me into a hug. Body frozen and heart still, I could barely hear her murmured words of apology as she almost begged me to forgive her for not telling me. Something about not wanting to disappoint me, knowing that I love my father.

Love?

Loved?

I didn't know any more. Everything was crumbling around me; school was a mess with Sofia, home was a disaster with *this* . I couldn't be safe at school, I couldn't relax at home. So where could I go? I couldn't stay here, could I? Not in a place where I could remember all the happy times we had, where my dad had just been smiling at me just hours before. I had to go, to get out of her, to get some air.

"Mum, I... I have to go. I can't... I'll... I'll be back soon," I said quickly, gently removing my mum's arms from mine and quickly rushing out the door. Before the door closed behind me, I could see Jamie consoling mum, loudly saying that I'll be fine.

Would I be? How could I be? How could I be fine when everything was falling apart?

Feet quickening and vision blurring, I walked and jogged and ran, letting my feet take me anywhere but here. Soon, behind the curtain of tears, I saw a rainbow of colours and inhaled the comforting scent of flowers. Lights shone through a set of windows on the second floor, the curtains partly drawn and a shadow moving between them. My feet knew where to take me, wanting to find a place where I would be safe.

Knocking on the door, I heard a sharp gasp as the door opened, Bell's gentle face immediately ushering me inside. Seeing my tear-streaked face and shaking form, Bell didn't bother with formalities, pushing me with soft hands towards the stairs.

"He's upstairs, honey," Bell said, giving me a warm, comforting smile. "Stay as long as you need."

Nodding, I quickly made my way upstairs, eyes focused on the light pouring from the slit beneath a familiar door. For a door that once made me sick to the stomach at the mere thought of it, in this moment it couldn't have soothed my frazzled nerves more.

Stepping closer, I pushed on the door softly, the squeak of bed springs wafting through the air as I opened the door fully. Nico lay there, eyes wide as I revealed myself, his larger body immediately getting up from the sheets to envelope me in a tight embrace. His warmth poured into me while my tears warmed the front of his shirt as I cried, Nico murmuring things I couldn't quite hear against my hair, his arms slowly pulling me towards his bed. Lifting me onto the mattress, my body snuggled between the warm sheets and Nico's arms, I knew I was home.

A/N: This was a bit of a long one, but I kind of want to get the rest of this story moving :') I'd like to quickly thank everyone that has left

kind and hilarious comments on the various chapters of this story - I'm a terrible human being and have struggled to reply to them all, but just know that I do appreciate all the feedback and comments I do get. They really do mean a lot to me, and always make my day :) Thanks for reading!

THIRTY-NINE

"Here, Wes," Nico said softly, placing a warm mug into my arms. He settled himself beside me, wrapping his left around around my shoulders to nestle me towards him. His hand rubbed up and down my arm in comforting strokes, warming me more than the hot chocolate did in my hands.

"Thanks," I murmured quietly, resting my head on his shoulder. Nico's chest rumbled as he hummed in response, pressing a kiss to the top of my head, his touch feather-light. Nico gave me a soft smile as he rubbed his sleeve against my cheeks, dabbing away the remaining evidence of my tears. While I cried, Nico hadn't said anything and just held me, squeezing his strong around me almost as hard as I clung onto him. It had taken me the good part of an hour to calm down, at which point Nico planted me on the couch, bundled up in blankets that smelled like him while he made us warm drinks.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Nico coaxed softly, taking a sip of his hot chocolate as I shakily blew on the steaming surface of my own. My throat grew tight as I sniffled, closing my eyes to try and will the newly-forming tears to stop. Nico, seeing my reaction, kissed the top of my head again, and murmured against it, "Only if you want to."

"I-I do," I said, sniffling again whilst I rubbed my eyes dry. Nico gave me a long look, one that asked if I was sure, and I nodded in answer to his silent question. Nico didn't push me or pressure me, and just quietly sat there with his mug in one arm and me in the other. I slowly told him about what happened, pausing only to stem the flow of tears and gather my thoughts. Nico didn't interrupt me, his only reaction to my words being an increasingly furrowed brow and the occasional squeeze of my arm. I was grateful for his understated reactions; holding me a little closer when I needed it and giving me space when I wanted it. When I finished recounting what had happened earlier that night, Nico nodded, lost in thought for a moment.

"Nico?" I asked, prodding him in the side after taking the last sip of my hot chocolate, putting the cup on the coffee table by our legs and licking the film of milk from my lips. "What are you thinking about?"

"Hm? Oh, just thinking about my parents," he said, giving me a lopsided grin as I cocked my head to the side, curious.

"Are they..." I started, fingers awkwardly fiddling with themselves in my lap as Nico snorted, shaking his head.

"They're not dead, if that's what you're asking," Nico said, chuckling to himself. "They're divorced."

"Oh," I said, shuffling a little closer so I could wrap my arms around his middle, his arms repositioning themselves to allow me to come closer. "Sorry... I guess me talking about all this brought up some bad memories." A kernel of guilt jumped around in my stomach, but Nico just rolled his eyes at my words and pinched the flesh of my arm teasingly.

"Stupid, don't be sorry," Nico said, shrugging. "It was a long time ago, when I was really young. It was hard at the time, but things got better."

"How long did it take?" I asked, peering up at Nico, whose eyes were wandering over the distant walls of the living room.

"A while," Nico answered vaguely, sighing. "But it wasn't just because of the divorce, more because I was being used as some kind of tool by my parents to spite each other. They fucking hated each other's guts. My mum was basically a money hungry bitch two-timing my dad, but then he was an alcoholic bastard who spent more time at work than home. When he did come home, though, all he did was argue with my mum. When they finally decided to split, they couldn't bear the thought that one of them would come out better than the other, so they kept using me to get back at one another." Nico's face scrunched up as he recounted the bitter memory, disgust evident on his face.

"Is that why you're living with Bell?" I asked, Nico nodding as his face softened.

"Yeah," Nico said, finally dropping his eyes from the wall to look at me, his thumb carefully tracing the edges of my jaw. "I guess that's when things started getting better. It took a little while, though. They kept splitting up and getting back together, but Bell eventually had enough of their crap and ended up getting custody, and then they finally split for good." Hearing about Nico's parents made my heart ache a little, even more so when I remembered the image of Jamie comforting my mum as I closed the door behind me.

"And... And have you seen your parents since?" I asked, gulping. Nico nodded, but his eyes were cloudy.

"I saw them a few times since then, but I haven't for years. Even after everything, they still try to use me to damage each other. My mum kept forcing my dad to pay up on the pretence of child support, and my dad kept trying to use money to turn me against my mum. I haven't seen them for years though, and I'm better off that way," Nico said, before nudging his nose against mine. "Don't confuse my messed up family for yours though. From what I've seen, your sister seems to care about you a whole lot. I mean, she did yell at me no your behalf before." Nico chuckled at the memory of the bowling alley, which made me smile ruefully in response. So much had changed since then, it almost felt like another life.

"Anyway, things... Things will get better for you, too. It might just take a while, but I'll be here in the meantime," Nico said, thumb reaching up to press against my lower lip.

"Only until things get better?" I asked, feigning a whining expression. "I guess we're going to break up pretty soon then."

"Hmph," Nico said, looking slightly offended that I even brought up the idea, his nose crinkling as he shot me a look. "You know what I meant." Laughing at Nico's childish reaction, my heart grew lighter. Seeing his pout deepen at the sound of my laughter, I pressed a lingering kiss against his cheek, Nico's mouth twitching slightly.

"Don't be mad," I cooed, tugging at Nico's torso with both of my arms, his body shaking a little.

"If you give me another kiss I won't be mad," Nico said, his mouth already starting to blossom an uncontrollable smile. Snorting, I grabbed the sides of his face and pulled it around, kissing his other cheek. His cheek pulled tight under my mouth as he smiled, a throaty laugh escaping his lips.

"Better?" I asked as I pulled back, Nico nodding.

"Much better."

"Good," I said, giving him an extra kiss on his shoulder before leaning my head down on it. It wasn't long before I found my eyes growing heavy, my jaw clicking as my mouth opened widely in a yawn.

"Falling asleep?" Nico asked, shaking my arm lightly as I nodded, rubbing my eyes with the palm of my hand. "Let's go to bed, then."

"Mm-kay," I said, getting ready to stand up and head towards Nico's bedroom. To my surprised, before my body could lift itself off the couch, Nico had slipped an arm under the fold of my knees and another around my mid-back, hoisting me up into the air. Yelping with surprise, my arms flailed in the air before securing themselves around his neck.

"Nico!" I hissed, giving him a short look as he smothered his laughter into my shoulder as he began to walk towards the stairs, his arms securely holding me to his chest. "Put me down!"

"Put you down?" Nico teased, eyes gleaming with mischief. "Okay." With that, his arms flexed from beneath me. Not more than a second later, my body was airborne once again, a screech dislodging itself from my throat as my body began to follow the laws of gravity.

"Nico, catch me!" I screamed, Nico laughing as he easily caught me in his embrace again, seemingly satisfied at my terrified face and the way I clung to him desperately. "I fucking hate you," I grumbled, hitting my fist half-heartedly against his shoulder blades as he carried us up the stairs, looking pleased with himself at my expense.

Making it to Nico's room in one piece (with no help from Nico), he finally let me down when we reached his bathroom, the two of us quickly brushing our teeth. Nico finished before me, and walked back into his room to get changed, returning a few moments later with some more clothes in his arms.

"Here, Wes. Wear these," he said as he handed the clothes to me. They were soft in my hands and looked quite old, but not to the point of falling apart. Unfolding the garments revealed a large T-shirt that would have been slightly baggy on Nico's larger frame, but dramatically oversized on me. Alongside the T-shirt were a well-worn pair of loose-fitting basketball shorts. Something about seeing Nico's old clothes made my stomach flip, suddenly feeling giddy despite my tiredness.

"Thanks," I said quickly, holding onto the garments without moving. Nico, too, didn't move from his spot, and just watched me with amusement as I blinked at him.

"Are you going to get changed?" Nico asked, making me flush. Taking a step forward, Nico tugged on the hem of my shirt, fingers brushing against the warmed skin of my stomach, just above the waistband of my pants. Sucking in a tight breath, I hastily stepped to the side and around Nico's frame, rushing into his bedroom.

"I'm getting changed!" I said, Nico snickering. Cheeks red, I quickly pulled off my clothes and replaced them with Nico's. Like I thought, his clothes were large on me, but the soft material was comfortable and the smell of them comforting. As I neatly folded my clothes and placed them on top of Nico's desk chair, Nico carefully walked behind me and wrapped his arms around my form, pulling me against his chest.

"You look good in my clothes," Nico said, making me roll my eyes as I tried to get my cheeks to calm. "It's cute how they swallow you up."

"Shut up, I'm too tired to deal with you," I said, huffing as Nico just laughed.

"Sure, sure. Let's go to bed then," Nico coaxed against my ear, his breath tickling the sensitive skin at my ear lobe. Face hot, I didn't answer him in case my voice came out breathless, and just nodded instead. Nico's knowing chuckle reverberated through my bones as he guided us to his bed, half pushing and half carrying me onto his mattress. Despite the smirk on his face, Nico didn't do anything inappropriate, and simply pulled the blanket over the two of us, shuffling himself closer to me so he could press his larger body against my back, his arm gently resting across my waist.

"Good night, Wes," Nico said quietly, and I shivered a little when I felt him press a chaste kiss against my shoulder, the heat of his touch spreading through the fabric of his T-shirt.

"Good night," I murmured in response, moving my arm to entwine my hand with the one resting on my stomach. I felt Nico exhale happily, his hand squeezing mine, as he pressed a kiss to the back of my head.

Even with everything that happened, even though my world had crumbled to pieces, in that moment and in his arms, everything seemed to be alright.

A/N: Sorry for the late release, and thank you to everyone who has left such nice comments on this story. I really do love writing this story and want to get out more chapters for you, but life just has to get in the way :') Hope you enjoyed this one though, and I'll try my best to get the next one out sometime soon!

FORTY

I woke to a fluttering feeling trekking across my cheeks, as if tiny feet were skipping across my skin. My face scrunched up at the feeling, which immediately stopped when I rolled over. A chuckle sounded from above me head as my head softly pressed against a hard yet comforting chest.

"Goo-morn-ngh," I mumbled, not quite able to enunciate my words through the thickness of sleep.

"Mhmm," Nico hummed, pulling me closer to him with the arm locked around my waist. "Morning, babe."

Smiling against Nico's chest at the pet name, I forced my eyes open to blearily peer up at my boyfriend. Through the haze of my imperfect vision, I could see that Nico's eyes were laden with sleep and his face speckled with stubble, his mouth pulled up in a lazy smile as he slowly collected his consciousness.

"You're up earlier than usual," I commented, pulling away from him slightly to rub my eyes. "Something wrong?"

"Does something have to be wrong?" Nico asked, snorting while his body flexed to prop himself up with a bent arm, head cradled in his hand. Rolling my eyes, I fumbled around for a few moments to grab my glasses, Nico's handsome face soon clear.

"You're never up before nine, let alone before *me*, so excuse me for being suspicious," I said, sitting up in the bed to peer at the clock. It was only 7am, and the alarm set on my phone hadn't gone off yet. Nico just laughed at my words, inching closer to me so he could lie his head on my lap, his dark hair falling from his face to brush against my thighs. Nico's smile faded when he raised his hands up to press against my face, likely running his fingers over the darkness under my eyes.

Despite waking up in a serene state, the night itself had not been as pleasant. My dreams had been turbulent, a relentless nightmare where I kept running and running behind the shadow of my father, my mother's wails trailing behind me and Jamie's curses nipping at my heels. When I finally reached my father's back he would turn, but before I could see his face the scene would change. I would be in the middle of the school hall amongst a sea of faceless bodies, but despite them having no faces I could feel their non-existent eyes on me. Again I was running, running through these halls as a chorus of voices screamed at me.

"Gay," they yelled. Amongst the throng of faceless images, a few stood out from the crowd. Sofia, Parker, Leo and Rachel sneered at me from the side, disgust twisting their features. I ran and ran, my own throat raw as I screamed one word.

One name.

Nico .

And then, suddenly, the nightmare would end and I would wake up, chest panting and eyes damp. When I woke with his arms around me, his chest rising and falling steadily and his heartbeat pulsing though his shirt and into mine, the panic would subside and the fear would end. Nico had woken up the first time, my fingers clutching at his shirt enough to pull him out of his own dreams. He had murmured comforting words to me in a husky, half-asleep voice tinged with concern, his voice growing more and more distant as it lulled me back into sleep. When I woke fitfully the second time, Nico was in a deep sleep, and I didn't have the heart to wake him. Instead, I pressed myself against him, and that was enough.

He would always be enough.

But now, Nico could clearly tell that after he fell back asleep the first time, it was not the same for me.

"Didn't sleep well after?" Nico asked quietly, making me shake my head, though a smile spread across my face at his concern.

"I'm fine now, though," I said earnestly, hands running through Nico's hair. "Honest." Nico didn't respond, instead hooking his hands around the back of my neck, pulling me down towards him. Grinning a little, my eyes instinctively fluttered shut as our faces neared each other, his lips brushing against mine.

BEEP- BEEP- BEEP.

An obnoxious, high-pitched noise screeched from the bedside table beside me, my phone vibrating as my alarm chimed.

"Tsk," Nico grumbled, voice annoyed as he turned towards the sound, blue eyes glaring at it as I giggled, wriggling from under Nico's head to turn my phone off. My movement only seemed to make Nico more frustrated, the boy muttering something heavily punctuated with profanity as he flopped onto his stomach, head buried in the pillows. His tattoos were a stark contrast against the lightness of his sheets, and the sight of him throwing a miniature tantrum at being interrupted by an alarm made me snicker, colour tickling my cheeks.

"Nico~" I cooed, shifting my body on the bed to straddle his lower back. Nico didn't move, though he let out a quiet grunt at the sudden weight on his body. "Hey, are you pouting?"

"I'm not," Nico whined. *Yep, definitely pouting* .

"Heh," I chuckled, gripping his shoulders to give him a slight shake. "Nico, don't be a baby."

"Don't be a *baby* ?" Nico asked, head whipping around with narrowed eyes.

"Yep, don't be a baby," I reaffirmed, a cheeky grin on my face as I continued, " *Baaaaaby* ." Nico stared at me for a long second, before his body suddenly rolled, sending my flying off his back. Yelping, I feebly wriggled as Nico pressed me down into the bed, lopsided smirk on his face.

"Say it again," Nico said, voice a little rough as his eyes gleamed.

"Say what?" I asked, feigning ignorance as Nico licked is lips slightly, leaning down until our noses bumped.

"B-a-b-y," Nico said slowly, making my cheeks heat.

"I wasn't saying it like *that* !" I said, shaking my head vigorously. Nico, ignoring what I said, pressed a lingering kiss to my cheek, mouth trailing down my jaw and skittering to the left until the rested against my mouth.

"Say it," Nico urged, body heavy atop mine as his eyes bored into mine. Gulping, I cleared my throat as my eyes dropped from his.

"B-Baby," I whispered, Nico's eyes crinkling as his smile widened, reaching all the way to his eyes. Seeing his pleased reaction, I grew more embarrassed, finding enough strength to wiggle out of his arms and off the bed. Nico didn't try to stop me and just lay on the bed, eyes watching me happily as I tried to rub the red out of my cheeks.

"Stop staring at me, idiot," I mumbled, looking at the time on my phone. "And we're late now. Hurry and get ready for school."

"I will if you call me *that* again," Nico drawled teasingly, leaning back in the bed with challenging eyes.

"Shut up and get out of bed," I retorted, whirling on my heels and into the bathroom, Nico's laugh trailing behind me. Closing the door behind me, my body leaning against it, I couldn't help but smile.

If I can wake up like this every day, things will be okay. I'll be okay.

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"Hey, have you heard?" someone whispered to my side, my ears tickling.

"Oh, yeah, he's the one that cheated on that quiet girl in year 11, right?" a second voice replied, voice barely even trying to be silent. My stomach knotted as multiple pairs of eyes fell on me, the hallways of the school beginning to close in.
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"Yeah. I didn't even know they were dating, because, I mean, he's so..."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. But he doesn't look like the type that would cheat, he's so... you know... nerdy." I felt Nico bristle next to me, his teeth grinding. Sensing his muscles become taut, his steps slowing as he neared the two girls, I hastily tugged on the hem of his shirt, shaking my head. Nico looked at me, jaw tight, but kept walking straight.

"Ugh, tell me about it. I feel bad for the girl, though. She could do so much better than *him.* " The tight feeling in my stomach spread, my guts twisting and my heart hammering. The colour drained from my face as we began to walk closer and closer to them

"So true. What's his name again?" the second voice asked as Nico and I walked past.

"Wesley," the first voice replied, my name crystal clear, as if the whole hallway had fallen silent at that exact moment.

Oh my God. As I thought, they were talking about me. That niggling, foreboding feeling was, as always, scarily accurate. Cheating? Dating? Even though the whole rumour was ludicrous, I knew exactly who the 'poor girl' was referring to. There was only one person that it could possibly be, one person deluded and motivated enough to say something like that.

Sofia.

"Those fucking-" Nico growled, body turning towards the two girls, face vicious.

" *Nico* ," I pleaded, hand grabbing around his wrist this time, pulling firmly. Nico's arm was trembling under mine, his hand clenched into a fist as if he were ready to slam it into a wall. Or into a few faces. "Nico, it's fine. Let's just go."

"But they're saying-"

"I know what they're saying," I gulped, heart heavy. "We know it's not true. It... it doesn't bother me. Just... just let it go, I'll be fine."

Liar.

Nico looked at me like he wanted to say something, but I cut him off with a hard look and a firm squeeze of his wrist. Nico looked at me for a moment, before glancing around and noticing that it wasn't only the two gossiping girls who were looking at us. Swallowing down his anger, Nico gave me a stiff nod, though he couldn't help but send a withering look to the two girls, who flinched at the gaze.

"I'll drop it for now because that's what you want," Nico said as we reached my locker, the crowd thinning out as people began to head to their classes as the bell rang. "But I'm not okay with it."

I'm not either.

"Thanks, Nico," I said, giving him a grateful smile, ignoring the prickling feeling of people staring at my back. "I'm fine, though. The rumours are complete lies, so people will figure that out pretty quickly. I mean, even those girls said that, um, you know, I'm not really capable of having a girlfriend." I peered up at Nico, a secret smile on my face as I carefully gauged his response. His frown twitched before morphing into a half-grin.

"Hmph, I'm glad they're right," Nico said, moving a little closer to my side. "I don't know what I'd do if I had to worry about other girls chasing after you." The moment Nico's words left his mouth, I let out a snort, slapping his arm in amusement.

"I don't know if I should be offended or touched," I said, rolling my eyes. Nico just smirked, his body close enough to mine for his chest to brush against my arm. As soon as his body touched mine, a chilling sensation spread across my body, neck hairs bristling.

Whipping around, I glanced around, swallowing nervously. There weren't many people around since the bell rang, and those that were in the

surrounding hallways were too busy balancing their books and running to make it to their classes to stare.

"Wes?" Nico asked, brow creased at my sudden change in demeanour. "What's wrong?"

"I just... felt someone staring at me," I said, shivering. The cold still spread across my back, leaving me unsettled. Something in that gaze wasn't right, different from all the other curious looks from before.

After hearing me, Nico's eyes narrowed as he too swept his eyes across the halls.

"Maybe I'm imaging things," I said, shaking my head as I closed my locker. "Anyway, I'm going to class now. I'll see you later?"

"Of course," Nico said, eyes still alert, though his face softened when he turned to me. "I'll be waiting for you. If anything happens..."

"Nico," I said, nudging him with my shoulder as I stepped past him in the direction heading towards my classroom. "I'll be fine."

Liar.

A/N: I actually got this chapter early, which is probably even weirder than Nico waking up on time haha I would just like to quickly thank everyone who's left such lovely comments on this story, I have a great time reading (and laughing) over them, they really make my day! I'm always happy when people enjoy my story! So, thanks for reading this chapter, and I'll see you in the next one! :)

FORTY-ONE

The class before lunch always tended to drag on and on, but today's one in particular seemed to move in slow motion. The mocking ticking of the clock was only drowned out by the cacophony of whispers niggling at my back.

"He's the one right? The one that cheated on that girl the year below us?"

"I always saw them sitting together at lunch and they seemed close. Guess this can happen to any one."

"He really doesn't seem like the type to cheat. He looks plain, but I guess he's an asshole too, huh?"

"Huh, it's his loss to be honest. She was too good for him in the first place."

A fresh wave of bile rose up in my throat, an uneasy shiver trickling down my hunched spine. I kept my head down, cold sweat making my school shirt cling to my back. The books in front of me were blurred as I blinked furiously to fight back the tears that wanted to dribble down my cheeks. Contrasting to my normal habits, my notebooks were empty apart from a few dazed scribbles, my mind so far from mathematical formulae and chemical equations.

"Unfortunately, I think that's all the time that we have today," my maths teacher sighed over the sudden shrill screaming of the lunch bell, pushing his thick-framed glasses up with his middle finger. "I expect you all to finish the exercises in section 16.3 of the textbook by next class." A chorus of groans erupted from around me, people already rising from their seats to make a quick escape from the suffocating classroom.

While I was stacking my books into a pile, a sudden force collided with my back, my whole body lurching forward. My hip bone slammed into the hard edge of the desk, the blunt force making me let out a strangled sound of pain.

"Oh, sorry," a guy muttered from behind me, his friend nudging him as he walked past.

"Dude, you don't even have to apologise, he totally deserves it."

The guy that that bumped into me looked me up and down quickly, before recognition dawned on his face. His mouth curled up in a sinister grin, eyes cold.

"Oh, he's *that* guy, isn't he?"

I gulped at the way his friend snickered, nodding his head. Before they could say anything further, I hastily grabbed my books and hugged them tightly against my chest, brushing past the two with my head down. Ignoring the people filling the halls and the beady eyes following my trail, I didn't look up from my feet once, not until I made it to the pool. With how fast I ran there, Nico had only just arrived, his broad back facing me as I neared the shed.

"N-Nico," I choked out, his statuesque form turning at the sound of his name. His mouth popped open when he saw me, but didn't manage to make a sound as I slammed into him, burying my face into his chest and locking my arms around his middle.

"Bad day?" Nico asked, voice low, his own arms pulling me in closer. His large hands rubbed broad, slow circles against my back, only stopping momentarily to open the door to the shed. The two of us stumbled into the shed, feet bumping into each other as we didn't drop our embrace, despite struggling to walk.

"Pretty bad," I mumbled, answering his question from earlier. Pulling back, I gave Nico a tired smile. "But it could've been worse."

Nico snorted, the displeased look on his face faltering for a moment as he smiled. He opened his mouth to say something, but my stomach decided it would be a good time to let out a prolonged growl, my cheeks flaming. Nico choked on his laughter, making me swat my hands at his face to try

and get him to shut up. Grabbing my failing hands in his, Nico teasingly nudged at my unruly stomach.

"We should get you something to eat, babe," Nico chuckled, rubbing my stomach like I was seven months pregnant, almost on the verge of cooing at it.

"I didn't bring anything for lunch, and by now I'm pretty sure the cafeteria would be a war zone," I sighed, lightly slapping Nico's hand on my stomach.

"What do you have fifth period?" Nico asked, pursing his lips as he thought for a moment.

"Um, chem. Oh, but my teacher is sick apparently, so they turned it into a free study session. I was planning on staying to catch up on work though..." I said, frowning a little. At that moment, my stomach decided to rumble again, Nico pinching the soft skin there in response.

"Hm... you sure, babe?" Nico asked, his fingers moving to grasp both of my hips, thumb squishing into the flesh of my lower stomach. They rubbed up and down, slowly pulling me towards him. My body was like clay under his fingers, feet oozing forwards in compliance. "We could go out to eat, and then go for a drive, and then maybe go back to my place..."

"U-Um," I stammered, Nico's fingers giving my belly another squeeze. "I-I guess we could..."

"Did someone mention lunch?" a chirpy voice called out from the door. Eyes widening, I jumped backwards, Nico's hands soon grasping empty air. Nico's brow twitched in amusement, his arms crossing in front of his chest. Soon enough, Benny's shit-eating grin revealed itself from behind the door, my body relaxing but my face unamused.

"What are you doing here, Benny?" I asked, Nico stepping forwards to stand at my back, his arms draping themselves across my shoulders and his head atop mine. Benny's grin only widened as I noticeably stiffened, embarrassment colouring my face.

"Oh, no reason," Benny said, his voice falling into a song-like melody. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything..."

"You didn't, Benny," Nico grinned, tugging me against his chest. Benny's face told me that he knew that wasn't quite the case, eyes alight.

Get rid of that shit-eating grin before I get rid of it for you, for fuck's sake.

"Good, good," Benny said, nodding happily while shooting me another sickeningly entertained grin, which I returned with a sour frown. "But back to the main topic. What did I hear about lunch?"

"This one," Nico said, gesturing at me, "has no lunch, so we were going to go out and grab food."

"Oh, cutting class are we, Wes?" Benny asked, shoulders shaking as he grew excited, his grin only widening.

"I technically have a free period," I said flatly, Benny waving away my words.

"Oh, what a coincidence!" Benny exclaimed, voice layered thick with false surprise. "I do too. Oh, but since you two are going on a *date* , I guess I'll just go have lunch by myself..."

"D-Date?!" I squeaked, Benny wiggling his brow shamelessly as Nico just chuckled, squeezing me a little tighter. "We're just getting lunch, you ass."

"You're welcome to join us, Benny," Nico said, amused. Surprised, I tilted my head back to try and see Nico's face, which was neither showing any sarcasm or displeasure.

"Well, if you insist," Benny drawled, skipping towards us gleefully. The three of us left the shed soon after, Nico on my right and Benny flanking my left. After grabbing our bags and heading to Nico's car, Benny quickly tugged my arm, whispering quietly.

"As your best friend, I'll take on the burden of being your official third wheel. Don't worry, I got the position covered," Benny chortled, my cheeks

heating up. Kicking Benny in the shin, I grimaced as I climbed into Nico's passenger seat, the boy giving me a small smile, hand reaching over the centre console to grasp my hand. I turned the radio up when Benny's poorly-concealed whistle filled the car.

Glancing at Nico, I saw that he had a serene smile on his face. Benny's grinning face was clear in the rear view mirror, and a matching one was soon painted across my reflection in the car's glass window.

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"Uh..." I said, scratching my neck awkwardly as the three of us took our seats in a side booth at the restaurant. It was exactly the same as it had been a few months ago, though it was emptier than it was during dinner hours. The same bitter waiter lazily flicked through his phone from behind the bar, and an elderly couple sat at the table I had been seated in to our left.

The bright *Nicoletta's* cursive on the window reminded me of the last time I had been here, the memories slowly eating away at my now waning appetite.

"You okay, Wes?" Nico asked, thanking the waiter as she gave us our menus, her movement clunky as she tried to sneak curious glances at Nico under the thick fringe of her false lashes. Though she coquettishly asked us whether we would like still or sparkling water, hips swaying and hair flicking, Nico barely spared her a glance as he passed me a menu, leaning in to peer at it from the side. The waitress, glossy smile barely faltering, was quickly ushered away by the stony-faced waiter from last time, who snapped at her to wait on table 8.

"I'm fine," I said, Benny's head tilting to the side as he looked at me. Recognition dawned on his face, and I gave him a look to warn him from speaking, but the silent message whizzed straight past his head and into the bin behind him.

"Ohhh, this is where you went with Sofia that time, right?" Benny said loudly, Nico's head snapping towards me. Kicking Benny's leg under the table, he seemed to finally get the message, his eyes avoiding mine.
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"Ha ha... yeah..." I weakly chuckled, suddenly finding the menu very interesting. "N-Nico, I can't choose between the ravioli and the chorizo pizza. Do you want to share?"

"Is that what you shared with her?" Nico asked, fingers plucking the menu from my fingers.

"Hell no!" I refuted, shaking my head wildly. "I-I can't even remember what I ate that day, but I remember that it didn't taste as good as your pasta!" Nico remained silent for a moment, before his face softened, his hand plopping itself atop my head, stroking it gently as if I were a child.

"You flatter me too much," Nico said, though his words didn't hold any air of modesty. Benny snickered from the other side of the table, his hand covering his mouth as he mumbled "whipped," under his breath. My so-called best friend was soon covering his coughs instead after I sent another precise kick to his shin, likely hitting the exact spot I did only a minute ago.

"A-Anyway, can we order?" I said, sliding down in my seat as the glossy-lipped waitress sauntered back over, water jug in her hand and her own jugs bouncing up and down wildly in a pitiful attempt to capture Nico's attention.

"Yeah, we can try those things today, but I'll make you better pizza some other time," Nico said, patting my head once more with satisfaction, before relaying our order to the waitress, who was too busy staring at Nico's face to remember to jot down our orders.

"Hello?" Benny said, waving his hand in front of the waitress's face a little, trying to place his order. The girl blinked, lashes sending a gust of wind down his face, before turning to Benny. Her eyes flicked upwards and then downwards, before falling onto the notepad in her hand. I couldn't help but snort at her clear disappointment in Benny's face, my friend shooting me a glare before bitterly ordering the cannelloni.

"Is my face really that bad?" Benny asked, taking out his phone to look at his face, zooming in and out.

"No comment," I said, dodging Benny's offended hand. Sighing, Benny slapped his cheeks after putting down his phone, giving Nico a long glance.

"Yeah, I guess you'd think that if you've got someone like Nico sitting next to you," Benny said, Nico's lips pulling up into a smile as he refilled Benny's water. Benny rolled his eyes, taking the water and gulping it down again. "Ugh, Nico that smug, handsome face of yours is making me lose my appetite, like damn."

Nico chuckled at Benny's words while slinging his arm across my shoulder.

"How's my face?" Nico asked me, voice dropping as he leaned in. His lip ring gleamed a little in the sunlight wafting through the window, Benny's gagging noise muffled by the clang of cutlery against plates and the sound of my own heartbeat.

"N-No comment?" I said, voice squeaking at the end. Nico's face drifted in a little closer, mouth dangerously close to mine.

"Yep, my appetite is definitely gone now," Benny said, excusing himself to the bathroom seconds later. "Finish eating each other's faces before I'm back, okay?"

"Benny, what the fuck," I huffed as Benny rose from his seat, holding up his napkin to shield his eyes from us. His form soon disappeared behind the curtains towards the back of the restaurant, Nico laughing at my embarrassment.

"So," Nico asked, pulling my face in his direction. "How hungry are you?"

Stomach flipping at the sultry gleam in Nico's eye, I glanced around at the restaurant. The elderly couple had just left, the lazy waiter was absorbed in his phone, and the flirtatious waitress was busy trying to balance three plates on her flaccid arms. No one was looking, right? Swallowing thickly before licking my lips, Nico's own throat bobbing at the motion, I softly held the front of Nico's shirt between my fingers.

"Just a little," I whispered quietly, Nico humming.

"That's enough," he said, pressing a chaste kiss on my lips. Moving his mouth against mine, Nico spoke again. Pulling back, running his thumb across my mouth as if to wipe away the evidence, Nico leaned back in his chair, looking satisfied and as smug as ever.

The smug, handsome face of yours? It only makes me hungrier.

A/N: Okay, I'm just going to say that I am honestly so shocked, overwhelmed and grateful for the sudden surge in readers, votes and comments! Just a week ago, this story only had maybe 30,000 views (don't quote me on that lol), and now we're so close to 100,000! ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND. For me, that number is crazy and I never thought that this story could even get anywhere near that. With the sudden increase in readers, it's hard for me to reply to every single lovely comment you guys have left, but I do look at them all and they're all truly appreciated. I'm still just super shocked that this story has gotten such a response, it really happened so suddenly haha In simpler words, I'm just hella shook ^_^

So, from the bottom of my heart, I'd like to say thank you to everyone who even clicked onto this story in the first place. See you (hopefully soon) in the next chapter~

FORTY-TWO

"The offer still stands," Nico said, pulling up to the curb in front of my house. "You know you're always welcome to stay at my place."

Smiling, I turned to Nico, closing my eyes when he reached out to caress my cheek.

"I know," I replied, sighing heavily. "But it's okay. I'm sure my mum is worried about me. I did kind of run off without telling them where I was going." A kernel of guilt lodged itself in my throat, my smile dropping.

"Mm," Nico murmured, kissing me on the forehead before letting go of my face, his expression a little downcast. My skin immediately felt a little colder, body already missing the feeling of his touch, but I steeled myself and climbed out of his car. Leaning down, head peeking through the open passenger window, I managed to give Nico a reassuring grin.

"If anything happens, leave your door unlocked, okay?" I said, Nico's gloomy expression immediately perking up, his mouth twitching as he gave me a long, lingering look. Reaching out towards him, he took my hand, taking it and staring at it for a long moment, as if he wanted to do something mischievous. He clearly decided against it when he simply kissed the palm of my hand, soon driving back to his home.

Standing on the side of the road long after his car disappeared around the corner of the street, I carefully tiptoed my way back home. The moment I stepped inside, I felt the brush of cold entwine itself around my ankles. Although it was mid-afternoon, the house was dark, with all the blinds drawn and shadows painted across all the walls. It was rare that the house was so dark, with someone always opening the blinds to let in the natural light in the morning. Swallowing nervously, I silently took off my shoes and walked around the living room, opening the blinds to try and cast away the shadows. After opening the first blind, I was stopped in my tracks when I saw stacks of large cardboard boxes stacked up against the far wall. Some

were full and sealed, labelled in heavy permanent marker. Others were still open, with neatly folded men's clothing peeking out from the unsealed edges.

Dad's clothes.

Walking over to one of the open boxes, I gingerly peeled back the flimsy folded lid, pulling out some of the items inside. Polo shirts, dress trousers, old coats. As my hands rummaged through all of the items, memories began to resurface. A polo shirt with a dark brown stain at the front reminded me of when Jamie was throwing a tantrum at Disneyland, her 10-year-old hands grabbing her sauce-laden hot dog and throwing it square onto dad's shirt. A pair of dress trousers, with a slither of mis-matched white thread on the left leg where mum had patched it up with whatever thread she had on hand during a relative's wedding. And a dark grey coat, the newest item in the box. It had been bought only about a year ago as a Christmas present. He had worn it once, but then went on a business trip to somewhere across the globe where the seasons were different. When he returned, it had warmed up significantly, and the coat stashed away until it would re-emerge next winter.

And now, it was stashed away again, in a box without a label.

My eyes stung with fresh tears, which I hastily rubbed away with the sleeve of my shirt. My chest was swirling in a mixture of frustration, anger and helplessness, my hands fumbling as they slammed the box shut.

"Wesley?" a soft, hesitant voice called from the staircase. Sniffling and casting my hand across my eyes once more to try and remove the damp evidence trekking down my cheeks, I turned. Mum stood there, a basket full of a random assortment of items cradled in her arms. When she saw me, her eyes quickly became glossy, the basket soon on the ground and her arms around me. Biting my lip, I stood there limply in her embrace, not sure about what to do and how to react.

"Oh, honey," mum breathed out, her voice trembling slightly. "I was so worried about you. I called everyone I could think of. Thank god Benny said that you were with him."

"Y-Yeah," I stammered, mum's arms beginning to feel a little claustrophobic. Wriggling from mum's grasp, I could only manage to look down at my bare feet as she tried to hide her own tears from me.

"Well, it's good that you're home now," she said, laughing tightly. "I don't have work tonight, honey, so what do you say we go out for dinner? You, me and Jamie. We can go to that Thai place you like, unless you feel like something else? Jamie did mention that there's a new Japanese restaurant opening around the corner..."

"Are we not going to talk about it?" I asked, voice small. Mum visibly flinched, making me look up. It was her turn to look at anywhere but me, her hands wringing themselves in front of her stomach.

"Talk about...?" mum breathed, her face pained as her eyes bounced off the walls, as if she couldn't decide where to focus her attention.

"The boxes," I said, jerkily pointing to the putrid brown beginning to climb up the walls. "And the reason for the boxes. You know, the thing that you and Jamie decided *not* to tell me?" My hesitation was quickly beginning to boil inside me, melting into anger. Over the past night, full of crying and tears, I had been able to wade away from the pool of sadness and self-pity, finding a shore of frustration. Had my mum and sister not been able to trust me? They didn't think I could handle the truth? Somehow, they thought that keeping something like my dad's infidelity from me was supposed to protect me?

They didn't want to hurt me, they had said. They thought keeping it from me would stave away the pain. But what they didn't realise was that dad cheating was always going to hurt me, but what really stabbed me right in the gut and twisted around inside me like a barbed blade was that they were lying to me. They didn't believe in me, they didn't trust me, and in the end, that hurt more than everything dad had done.

And now, with mum was still trying to pull the fraying wool over my eyes. Maybe, the better part of a year ago, I would have preferred that. To live pretending that everything was okay, that I was okay. To pretend to be something that I wasn't.

Honest.

Nico's voice echoed in my mind, his seemingly favourite word bringing me an overwhelming sense of relief. Once, the word had made me feel sick, my pathetic desperation to be the person I thought I wanted to be rejecting his advances like he were a virus. Now, knowing who *I* am and being undeniably accepted for it, I was done with living with only one eye open.

"Why didn't you tell me about dad?" I asked, voice soft but hard. Mum's face turned paler, the shadows under her cheeks prominent against her pallor. It took her a long time to find her voice, her throat bobbing up and down as she tried to speak without sobbing.

"You were always so close to your father," she managed to get out, her voice barely above a whisper. "I didn't want to... disappoint you." My heart was pained at how weak and defeated her voice sounded.

"How long were you going to wait until you told me? Were you ever going to tell me?" I asked, jaw taut.

"I-"

"Did you really think that I wouldn't find out? Did you not think that it would hurt more finding out like this?"

"Wesley, I only did this to protect you-"

"But you didn't," I said, my words choked as I swallowed the sob threatening to force its way up my throat. "There's nothing you could do to make what dad did not hurt, but that wasn't your fault! He's the one who decided to break apart this family, not you! But not telling me only makes things worse! It makes me think that everything's okay, that makes me hope for things that are never going to happen. Lies that are for the sake of protecting someone are still lies, and they always end up hurting."

Like how I lied to Sofia.

"Wesley, I'm sor-" mum started, face full of tears, her voice stopping when the front door opened. Jamie stood there, dark look on her face as he threw her satchel and laptop onto the couch as she walked into the living room, obviously coming back from her afternoon classes. Looking between the two of us, at my red-faced frown and balled fists, and mum's tear-dampened cheeks, her body immediately stomped towards us, stepping between the two of us. Her eyes were hard as she looked at me, her mouth pressed in a tight line.

"What are you doing, Wes?" Jamie asked, her voice accusatory. Behind Jamie, mum sniffled and wiped away her tears, shakily placing her hand on Jamie's shoulder.

"Jamie, calm down, Wes wasn't doing anything," mum said, Jamie shaking her hand off as she pointed a lacquered finger towards me.

"Wes, why are you acting like this after running off yesterday. Do you know how worried mum was? She even missed work today because she was so worried about you, and you come back and behave like this?"

"Behave like what exactly?" I asked, teeth gnashing as Jamie's words scratched at my skin. "Am I supposed to act like everything is okay, be all happy and smiley even when everything is going to shit?"

"Well, behaving like *this* ," Jamie said, eyebrows furrowing as she looked at me, like I was someone she didn't recognise. "You've been really weird these days, you know that? You're running off all the time to God knows where, and you come back at weird hours of the day without any explanation. And now you're acting out, and that's not like you."

"Hah," I laughed dryly, shaking my head. "At least I'm not acting like you. Jumping to conclusions, seeing only what you want to see, and acting like everything is fine even when it's not. Yeah, I'm really glad that I'm not acting like you."

"Jamie, Wes, both of you calm down," mum spoke, her voice firm. Jamie let out a huff, mumbling something about going to take a shower, leaving the room after giving me a harsh look. Turning to me, mum timidly squeezed

my forearm, eyes apologetic. "Wesley, don't listen to your sister too much. She didn't take the whole thing with your dad well, even now."

"I know," I replied, nodding slowly. Mum's hand on my arm felt uncomfortable, bumps beginning to appear on my skin, awkwardness filling the room. The whole house felt suffocating, the boxes making the room seem smaller and the darkness closing everything in. Needing to be alone, I quickly excused myself, rushing up to my room without looking back. Locking the door behind me, I flopped onto my bed, not bothering to change out of my uniform.

Fishing my phone out of my pocket, I called the one person that I needed to hear. There was barely a space between pressing the call button and the crackle as the person picked up the call.

"Wes? " Nico called through the phone, tone flushed with worry. "What's wrong?"

Sighing, I answered him, burying myself under my blankets.

"Everything."

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My head was cloudy as I looked over my test sheet, my thoughts an incoherent mess as the timer ticked down. Everyone's pens seemed to be moving at a rapid pace, but my hand was sluggish and each pull and push across the paper was laborious. With everything that has been going on, studying hasn't been at the forefront of my mind, and the mock exams were only pulling me further and further downwards. Before I knew it, Ms. Levenson's timer had cried out shrilly, people groaning around me as her rounded frame began drifting down the rows to collect our papers.

As she stepped beside me, her mouth popped open in surprise as she skimmed my paper over my shoulder. The older woman sighed, pulling her glasses downwards so they hung from her neck, patting my back comfortingly.
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"Don't forget to put your name on your paper, Wesley," Ms. Levenson said, my eyes blinking as I only just realised that I hadn't even put my name on the paper. Hastily scribbling my details down, shakily handing the paper to Ms. Levenson, I lethargically rose from my chair, spirits as low as they could possibly be.

"Are you alright, Wesley?" Ms. Levenson asked, frowning.

"I'm fine, sorry," I said, forcing a smile onto my face. Face not believing me in the slightest, Ms. Levenson just nodded, pulling her glasses back on as she tapped the pile of exam papers atop my desk, straightening them out.

"My office is always open, remember that, Wesley," Ms. Levenson said, before hefting the heavy stack of papers into her robust arms.

"Thank you, Ms. Levenson," I said gratefully, the normally intimidating woman giving me a small smile, before walking out of the classroom. Following her soon afterwards, I slowly made my way towards my locker, a few people glancing at me as I moved down the hall. Ignoring their glances, sure that they were whispering about the lies about me and Sofia, I jumped when I ran into the girl herself. She saw me just as I saw her, her face a complicated mess of emotions, before settling on something that made my stomach uneasy. I have seen her face display a myriad of emotions, from happy, to lovestruck, to hurt, to furious. But I had never seen *this* expression on her face.

Disgust.

Her brown eyes looked at me with contempt while her mouth curled downwards, parting slightly to reveal a sinister slither of sharp white teeth. The hairs on the back of my neck stood erect, cold sweat pooling at my back and my headache intensifying. Her look did not last long, her petite frame whirling around and disappearing down the eerily silent corridor.

Shaking off the feeling of Sofia's uneasy gaze, I quickly made my way to the cafeteria to buy lunch. The crowds were as deafening as always, the mass of people pulsing as they pushed and pulled to buy their food. The

moment I entered, however, everything seemed to quiet down, so much so that you could hear the sizzle of the grill in the open kitchen.

"That's him, isn't it?" someone whispered, their voice audible over the silence.

" Yeah, for sure. The picture's a little blurry, but that's definitely him," someone else said, their voices seeming to get louder and louder. My heart dropped, eyes glancing around the room as everyone stared back.

" Holy shit, can you even believe it? Him and, you know, are..."

" Yeah, it's fucking crazy," a voice snickered, venom leeching off her words.

"Him and Nico, I can't fucking believe it."

A/N: Things are starting to happen now~ Thank you all for reading this chapter, and all of the support you've given me and this story! Like I said last time, I'm still coming to grips with the fact that the response to story has gotten to this point. I know last time I was freaking out about getting almost 100,000 reads, but now it's gotten to almost 200,000 and I don't know what to do with myself. Also, it's apparently number 1 on the LGBT tag?! I'm just flabbergasted and extremely, extremely flattered. So, thanks again for reading, there will be more to come! School has picked up a bit, so I'm not 100% sure if I can get another chapter out as promptly as I have been, but I'll definitely try my best for ya'll :) I'd feel bad leaving you hanging at this point~

FORTY-THREE

With a hundred pairs of eyes on me, the cafeteria grew smaller and smaller as time dragged out. Voices slurred and faces blurred as I took a shaky step forward. Left foot, right foot, left foot, right foot. My feet felt like lead, stumbling across the floor as I felt the blood from my face stagnate, pooling at my weighted feet.

My shoulder bumped against the crowd of people who seemed so much taller than I was, their eyes piercing and their smiles mocking. Elbows stabbed into my sides and words scratched at my ears, all the while my body feeling like it was trying to wade through thick tar that started to dribble down my throat, suffocating me.

I could feel the panic start to pulse, my breathing laboured as I struggled to suck air up into my closed throat, ears ringing.

They know. They all know.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. They weren't supposed to find out like this.

It was supposed to be on my own terms, on mine and *Nico's* terms, but someone had taken it upon themselves to reveal what was rightfully ours to reveal. I wasn't ready for people to know, but I was getting there. I was going to be ready to come out to the world, but that day wasn't today. I knew that, and Nico knew that, and I'm sure that the person who unleashed my secrets into the universe knew that too. They just didn't care what damage it would do.

As I neared the exit of the cafeteria, a rigid weight snagged itself around my ankle, pulling my body into the air before crashing onto the ground. The cacophony of noise quietened to an intrigued buzz as I groaned, knees and wrists aching from where they caught the brunt of the fall.

Tears stinging my eyes, a pair of black leather shoes with the buckles undone stepped in front of me, kicking at my chest like I was a bug.

"Oh, *oops*, " a sickeningly shrill voice drawled, voice dripping with malice. "I almost stepped on trash."

Swallowing my pain, I grit my teeth and peered up, Alyssa's heavily contoured face staring down at me. Though her painted lips were spread in a bright pink grin, her eyes were cold. Holding her phone in a lacquered hand, she made a show of looking at it, a friend of hers snickering as she peered over Alyssa's shoulder. Flicking her hair over her shoulder before giving me another pointed look, she smacked her lips, gum squelching between her molars. Slowly, Alyssa bent down, grabbing my box-brown hair in her hands and jerking my head up, pulling harshly this way and that as she peered at my face.

Letting out a disgusted "tsk," the girl quickly dropped my hair, my scalp burning, before turning her phone screen towards me. Eyes wide and trembling, I looked at the picture blinking on her screen.

' *Nicolletta's* ' was spread across the screen in vibrant writing, but was partially cut off as the picture was zoomed in on a pair of figures sitting in a booth, eyes closed and lips locked tight. One with jet black hair, tattoos creeping up his arms, and another with his face partially hidden but visible enough to identify. Curly brown hair, a smattering of freckles across his nose and a light pink dusting his cheeks, the grainy image wasn't blurred enough to lie.

Me and Nico. There was no doubt about it.

My mouth opened, but only choked sounds came out.

"You know, I always thought there was something off about you," Alyssa said, eyes narrowing. "But who knew you'd turn out to be a fucking fag."

Fucking fag .

"I-" I started, mouth moving pathetically as the words buried themselves into my chest, searing and painful.

"And for Nico to go for someone like *you* ," Alyssa said, her words oozing with bitterness, "well, your ass must've been a really good fuck. What did you do, huh? You don't look like it, but you must've done some freaky shit for him to even look at you."

"It's always the quiet ones, man," someone sneered, the group surrounding us laughing with venom.

"I didn't..." I choked out, shaking my head desperately. "I didn't do anythin-" As I tried to speak, all the fear and panic that had been simmering began to boil over, the tears spilling as they slipped past my shattered defences. "I-I..."

"Ugh, the twink is fucking crying," someone spat. "He probably cries like this when he's taking it in the back."

"Ew, gross, Daniel," the guy's friend said, gagging.

"I can't," I said, voice weak and shaking. Wobbling to my feet, I kept my head hanging low, too rattled to even care about the tears washing across my ghostly cheeks. I yelped as I moved forward, body blocked by the crowd of people that had enclosed me.

"P-Please, I *can't* , I'm sorry," I cried, words interrupted by my hiccuped breaths. " *Please* let me go, I can't."

"You-" Alyssa started, her hand rising as she hissed. Before she could do anything, two hands grabbed me around the shoulders, pulling me along through a gap in the crowd. Looking up fearfully, I almost collapsed when I saw Benny's livid face glaring at the people in front of me, his skinny arms doing their best to help me wade out of the throng of people.

"Benny..." I murmured, my friend dropping his glare to look at me. Though his face was defiant, his hands on my shoulders were shaking.

"I know," he said, swallowing thickly as the two of us pushed through the crowd. "Let's get out of here first, we can figure things out afterwards." Benny's voice was breathless, sweat sticking to the hair falling across his forehead, his face red like he had run a marathon.

"Y-Yeah," I said, nodding frantically. As the two of us neared the automatic doors of the cafeteria, Alyssa's sharp voice rose above the tremor of murmurs and poorly-hidden gossip.

"Where do you think you're going, you fucking homo," Alyssa spat, one of her friends - Daniel - stepping forward, his arms reaching out to latch onto the back of Benny's shirt, Benny's eyes widening in panic. Suddenly, a chorus of shocked gasps and a pained grunt washed over the canteen, Benny and I turning sharply. My breath was knocked out of my already pained chest when I saw Daniel splayed on the floor, hand on his face and thick blood dribbling from his nose. His figure was soon obscured by a familiar back, muscles strained and shaking as it tried to rein in the anger rippling over every dip and curve.

Nico stood there, right hand balled in a tight fist, his group so tight that his fingers were white. His left arm was a different picture, outstretched from his side in front of me, a tattooed shield standing between me and the world.

"Nico," I whispered, legs trembling. Everyone's eyes were no longer on me, focused with rapt attention on my boyfriend. I, like them, couldn't look anywhere else, especially when Nico turned, his eyes afire and jaw tight with fury. This was the second time I had seen him looking like this, his visage at the bowling alley morphing with the one before me now. Taking my tear-streaked face in, Nico's expression dissolved into one of fear, trepidation, concern. His arms, which had just moments before been rigid with anger, slackened, tentatively reaching out towards me.

Nico's eyes bore into me, asking me a silent question that I had to answer. The automatic door at my back opened and closed lazily, matching every strained breath that I took. His hand moved closer, my body static. Fingertips brushed over my cheeks, wiping away the tears.

It was not meant to be like this. I was not ready. I knew it, and Nico knew it. But a decision had been made for me, and now I could either accept it, or run away from it.

The sliding doors opened and closed. Open. Close. Open.

Close.

As the door scraped together, I crashed myself into Nico's arms, wrapping my own around his middle. Head buried in his chest, muffling my cries into the front of his jumped that smelled a little like nicotine, I let everything go.

Nico's arms, wrapped around my so tightly, blocked out the sounds of shock echoing around the cafeteria. If there were any sceptics in the crowd, who didn't believe what they saw in the single, grainy photo spread across everyone's phones, they couldn't deny what was standing right in front of their eyes.

" *Hey* ," Daniel's crude voice seethed from behind, his large form rising from the ground. Droplets of blood were scattered across the front of his crinkled white school shirt, and more in a linear smear across his face after wiping it gruffly with the back of his hand. Nico growled as Daniel's bloodied hand dug into his shoulder, whirling him around. Pulled from my grasp, Nico gently pushed me away protectively, Benny gripping my shoulders again.

Seeing Nico turning towards him, Daniel let out a smirk, giving Nico a once over, eyes looking at him like he was a piece of dirt.

"We could see it in the fag over there, but to think that you'd be one of them too," Daniel said, looking around at the crowd. Some were nodding in agreement, others just had their mouths hanging open in shock, while the remainder nervously cast glances between me and Nico.

Nico's lips pulled back in a snarl, body rushing forward. Daniel barely had time to make another snide comment before Nico had gathered his shirt up in his hands, pulling the athletic male upwards with force. Daniel winced as Nico's fingers dug into his chest, the collar of his shirt cutting into his neck.

"N-Nico," I said, reaching out to grab onto the back of his shirt, fear seizing me. "Nico, don't-"

" *What did you call him* ? *"* Nico said slowly, voice dangerously calm. Daniel visibly gulped, but steeled his nerves, a nonchalant expression on his face as he grinned up at Nico.

"You didn't hear me?" Daniel chuckled, grabbing onto Nico's wrists, arms flexing as he wrenched his hands off his chest. Brushing off the front of his shirt, body movements slow and cautious, Daniel looked at me and snickered, his mouth moving slowly.

"I said f-a-g," Daniel said, tongue clicking.

The moment the echo of his slur dropped on the floor, Nico's fist lashed out, the sharp movement shaking off the feeble grip I had on his shirt. While I stumbled back with the sudden motion, Daniel was not taken by surprise and was ready for it this time, his jaw tensing as he blocked Nico's fist with his forearm. Nico grunted as Daniel tackled him, the two of them crashing onto the ground.

"Nico!" I yelled, Nico struggling as Daniel used his higher position to send punches towards his face.

"Not so cocky now that you're just a dick-loving fag," Daniel chortled, Nico grimacing as Daniel's fist landed on the side of his face, his other hand holding him down by the neck. Nico's eyes grew dark at the derogatory slurs spewing from Daniel's mouth, his arms attempting to block Daniel's blows, his movement limited by the weight of the man above him.

"S-stop," I pleaded, jelly-like legs tripping towards the two boys on the floor, my eyes only on one. "Stop hurting him!" Frantic, I latched myself onto one of Daniel's arm that hovered mid-air, needing both of my lanky arms to disarm him. Nico's eyes widened as he saw me gripping onto Daniel's arm for dear life, never having been in a fight in my life, my face twisted into sheer terror.

"Wes, get back!" Nico forced out Daniel's pressure against his throat, Daniel's eyes snapping towards me. Annoyed, Daniel released Nico's neck from his hand to grab me by the front of my shirt, shoving me harshly against the ground. The air was knocked out of me when my back collided with the hard floor, the ceiling spinning.

" *You're fucking dead!"* Nico shouted, voice wild and animalistic. Tilting my pained neck upwards, I saw Nico's body surge with power, his leg kicking up as his arms, no longer impinged by Daniel's frame on top of his, flipped the two of them over. He didn't give Daniel even time to register that he was the one now on the ground, Nico's fists slamming into his face and chest without relent. Daniel's mouth opened without a sound as he copped blow after blow, his hands unable to defend himself from Nico's rabid fists. Blood flowed, Daniel spitting out blood and his nose running red again. Daniel's eyes began to glaze over as his hands drooped, the strength leaving his body as much as his blood did.

"Nico, stop," I cried, crawling forward. Pulling my arms around Nico's back, eyes squeezed shut, I hugged him tightly. His fists slowed, his red and bruised knuckles dropping to his sides. "Stop, please, it's done." Voice soft, I buried my head against his shoulder, which was shaking in violent anger beneath my forehead.

"Wes, he said-" Nico started, turning is head towards me. His words were interrupted as the crowd began to disperse, people hastily glancing behind them. It was obvious what had caused the change, when a group of suited teachers stormed into the cafeteria. Peeling myself from Nico's back, I turned towards the teachers, a new kind of panic building.

Oh god, oh god, oh god.

"WHAT'S GOING ON HERE?!" the Principal Myer's gruff voice shouted, his hands dabbing at the sweat on his rounded face with a yellowing handkerchief. Seeing Nico above a barely conscious and bloodied Daniel, the principal's face turned purple with anger, jerking his fat finger towards us.

" *Nicolas Beckett* , this is the last straw. My office, *now* ."

A few teachers moved to push him away from Daniel's groaning form, some others helping the boy to the nurse's office. Nico slowly stood, his handsome space beginning to bruise and his split lip oozing, turning towards the principal with an expressionless face. Nico turned his head slightly to look at me, blue eyes tormented with worry. Seeing Nico's gaze and finally realising my presence, the principal glowered.

"And you," the principal said, his harsh voice making me flinch. "I am disappointed that you're involved in this mess. You're coming with us too."

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I sat outside the principal's office, leg jumping up and down and teeth nibbling on my already obliterated fingernails. From behind the closed door of the principal's office, muffled shouting could be heard. I strained my ears to try and hear what was going on, but could only make out a few words.

Trouble-maker. Last chance. Useless.

My concern for myself was trumped by my worries for Nico. It wasn't a secret that his presence at the school was on thin ice; his track record of failing subjects, smoking on campus and ending fights was well-known. No matter how sweet he was at home, or how gentle his caresses are or soft his words in private, even I couldn't make excuses after seeing him lose all sense of himself in the cafeteria. I didn't blame him, but I could be scared for him.

It's because of you .

My mind screamed the words at myself, stomping on my already weary spirits.

I jumped when the sudden sound of a door slamming against a wall erupted from my right. "Where is he?" a female voice breathed out, the receptionist gesturing towards me with her pen. Looking up, I swallowed fearfully when my mother's frantic figure rushed towards me. Her brown hair was tied back in a tight bun at the base of her head, the way she wears it during a shift.
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Usually neat and carefully manoeuvred into place, pieces were coming loose across the crown of her head, the bun beginning to slip from its tie.

Seeing me, her momentarily lost steps focused, her legs making a bee-line towards me. Standing up as she neared, I couldn't make eye contact as she gripped my arms, tears in her eyes. Her slender arms shook me back and forth, her head drooping as she tried to look at my face.

"Wesley, what is wrong with you?" Leanne cried out, angry and anguished. "You've... you've never caused trouble like this before. I can't believe that you'd be involved in a fight, I didn't raise you to be like this!"

As mum's words slapped me in the face, the principal's door opened and Nico walked out. Seeing his black and blue face, some bandaids scattered across his sharp features, mum's face darkened. Nico looked at the two of us, his face showing that he clearly wanted to say something. In a standstill for two moments, he decided against saying anything, the principal calling my mum and I in at the same moment.

"Wesley, go in and explain yourself," mum said firmly, pushing me towards the door. As we stepped past Nico, I brushed my hand across his forearm, squeezing once and giving him a lingering look.

'It's okay , " I tried to tell him, Nico's relieved face telling me that he received the message loud and clear. Touching the back of my hand before I was pulled away, Nico's image disappeared as the door closed between us. Turning around, I carefully took in my surroundings. Principal Myers sat at his heavy dark wood desk, glasses perched on the tip of his chunky nose as his fingers palmed through some files in his hands. Ms Levenson sat in a chair to the side, her eyes looking at me with worry.

"Wesley, Mrs Dillon," Principal Myers said gravely, my mum clearing her throat as we sat down on the uneven chairs on the opposite side of his desk.

"It's Ms Waites, actually," she said, shaking her head as she moved onto the topic at hand. "Whatever Wesley has done, I'm sure there are circumstances around the situation that can explain things." Turning to me, mum gave me a stiff nod, urging me to explain things.

Before I could speak, Principal Myers raised a hand to stop me.

"Mr Beckett has already explained his side of the story. It appears that you only got involved because you were trying to stop the fight, correct?"

Mum's mouth opened in surprise, but her angry expression quickly morphed into one of relief and pride, frown curving upwards into a smile.

"That..." I started, brain scrambling for words. The principal's words rung in my ears. They were full of lies, Nico's falsified version of events making guilt wash over me. It was me who was at the centre of the fight, me who got Nico involved. I may not have thrown any punches, but if it weren't for me, Nico wouldn't have hurt and been hurt. But now, in this dark office filled to the brim with bitterness and distrust, Nico had lied. Nico rarely lied, and in this instance, he did it to protect *me* .

After everything he's said to me about honesty, was I just going to sit here with the taste of his lie on my mouth?

"That's not true!" I said, standing up. Ms Levenson's brow quirked up as mum gave me a shocked stare, Principal Myers narrowing his eyes.

"Care to explain then, Wesley?" the stocky main asked, eyes hard.

"I-It was my fault. The fight," I said, Principal Myer's brows crinkling. "Daniel was... saying things about me, and Nico only got involved to help me. Things weren't meant to escalate that far, but Daniel kept-"

"Did Daniel throw the first punch?" Principal Myers asked, giving me a hard stare. Flinching at his question, my brain whirled back to the events of the canteen.

He hadn't.

My hesitation answered my question for me, Principal Myers humming to himself.

"And, who is sitting in the nurse's office with a broken nose and severe facial swelling?" the principal asked again, his tone answering his own

question.

"N-Nico's hurt too," I retorted weakly, mum's hand hastily pressing against my knee, warning me.

"Ah, yes," Principal Myers said, voice flat. "A few cuts and bruises, but only caused because of a fight *he* started. Wesley, you do realise that this isn't the first time Nicolas has been in this sort of situation? He has been warned numerous times before, and like I said before, this was the last straw for him."

"Last straw?" I asked, my hands gripping onto the hem of my jumper as my leg shook. "W-What does that mean?"

"It means, Wesley, that he has been expelled from our school," Principal Myers said, his cold face breaking out into a satisfied smile.

No.

Images of Nico flickered in my mind; our warm cuddles in the pool shed, our arguments over music in the car ride to school. Walking down the halls side-by-side, grinning at Nico's snoring during biology class. All of these memories invaded my mind, my body collapsing into the chair, unable to support my body.

Nico. Expelled. Because of me.

Unable to say anything, my mind a mess, mum leaned forward in her chair, to speak for me, hand tightening on my knee.

"Principal Myers, if that boy is getting expelled, is Wesley..."

Because of me.

Sighing, Principal Myers looked towards Ms Levenson, who pushed her glasses up with her forefinger, speaking for the first time.

"Wesley is a fantastic student. He's a hard worker, and that work pays off in his results. He has a bright future ahead of him, and this momentary...

distraction shouldn't hinder that," Ms Levenson said, mum slumping with relief.

"Oh, good," mum breathed, thanking the two teachers gratefully. "Wesley.... He's been going through a hard time. The situation at home is... difficult, at the moment." Mum's hand stroked the back of my hair softly, Ms Levenson and the principal giving us apologetic looks.

"We understand that, Ms Waites, and we are also aware of Wesley's potential. But still, he was involved in the events today, and there are always consequences."

"Oh," mum said, fidgeting as she waited for their verdict.

"Since this is his first offence, we'll be giving him a warning, and a one week suspension," Principal Myers said, mum's brow furrowing.

Suspension? I get a suspension, and Nico's expelled? No, that's not right.

"A suspension? Isn't that a little harsh?" she said, looking at me. "And won't that disrupt his studies? He'll miss important classes, won't he?"

"He'll receive all the coursework and will be expected to complete it all during that time," Ms Levenson said, mum nodding. "Ms Waites, Wesley is a capable student, it will be good for him to refocus on his studies at home, and come back refreshed."

"Yes, I suppose you're right," mum said, nodding. "So, is that all that there is to discuss today?"

"Yes," Principal Myers said, getting up from his chair to open the door for us. "We'll be contacting you if any other issues arise, but you are both free to go. Wesley, you will receive the coursework for next week via email."

Barely able to respond with a nod, mum quickly ushered us out, not saying a word as she pulled me to the car. The drive home was silent, the tension thick and suffocating. When we arrived home, mum immediately turned to me, tears in her eyes.

"Wesley, what is wrong with you?" she asked for the second time today, voice defeated. My own pathetic, useless voice whispered inside my head.

Everything.

A/N: This was a long one, but I hope you enjoyed it! My chapters are usually around 2000 words, but this one is almost 4000! After leaving you hanging last week, I hope I made up for it with this extra long (and early) chapter~ You guys deserve it, since you've honestly showed so much support for this story, it makes me shed happy tears <3

Also, I've seen quite a few comments saying Wes is a disaster gay, and I can't help but wholeheartedly agree. He's honestly a mess, but he can't help it when the world is out to get him.

And finally, thanks so much for reading! I'll try to get another chapter out ASAP, but just as a head's up, my exams are fast approaching so there might be a bit of a delay. I do apologise :')

FORTY-FOUR

"It's because of that boy, isn't it?" mum said, pacing around the foyer, hands knotted together. "He's not the one that Jamie told me about, is he? The one from the bowling alley? She said he had tattoos, and that god-awful lip ring. It must be him. Is he why you're acting up these days?Wes, why are you hanging around with someone like *that* ?"

For a second, Sofia's image flickered in my mind.

'There's no way you could be friends with someone like that.'

Everyone says the same thing about him, this boy that I *loved* . They didn't know how he really was, how everything seemingly rebellious action had a reason. How his facade of truancy was rooted in hard work behind the scenes, of late nights pouring drinks and early morning fixing cars. They didn't know that behind every punch was a gentle hug, a comforting, protective, Nico-like embrace. They only saw as deep as his tattoos, never further.

My closed throat loosened as guilt swam inside my stomach like tadpoles about to morph into frogs, growing and building until they had burst free. I clammed up in Principal Myers office, unable to bring my pathetic self to defend Nico, even after he defended me time and time again.

He's given me so much, and what did I give him in return? An expulsion and a bad reputation.

Grasping my guilt, I looked at mum, eyes firm.

" *Nico* isn't like that, mum. Don't talk about him like that when you don't even know his name," I said, voice biting. Mum took a step back in surprise, startled by the razors in my voice. Her shock soon withered into anguish, tears forming in her eyes.

"Wesley, you can't speak to me like that," mum whispered, grasping me firmly on my bicep. "Wes, this isn't like you. Is he bullying you? Blackmailing you? Wesley, you can tell me. I can see that he's a bad influence, just look at hi-"

"You can *see* that he's a bad influence?" I repeated, scoffing at mum's words. Heat spread through my, my own 'last straw' falling to pieces. Shaking her hand off me, I turned towards the stairs, stones in my heart. "Sorry, mum, but considering your judgement with men in the past, I can't say that I trust what you see."

I turned before I could see mum's face, though I'm sure from the way her body stiffened, it was a painful and ugly sight. Running up to my room and slamming the door, I threw myself onto my bed, limp and numb.

After spitting out those words that should have taken a weight off my shoulders, I only felt heavier and guiltier. I didn't have to see mum's face to know that what I said cut deep. My teeth hurt as I bit down heavily, burying my laborious sobs into my sheets. Not being able to say anything in front of Daniel and Alyssa, unable to find my voice to defend Nico with Principal Myers, but spitting out such hurtful words to my own mother?

Why couldn't I do anything right?

"What's wrong with you, Wes," I whimpered quietly, hitting the crown of my head with my fist. "Why are you like this? *God damn it* ."

It took me a long, long hour to even move from my bed. My stomach rumbled, acid burning with its emptiness, but I didn't want to leave to confines of my room. Not even bothering to shower, I pulled on my most comfortable clothes and crawled into bed, even though my clock hadn't clicked past four in the afternoon yet. Pulling my blanket over my head, like the soft fabric would shield me from everything, I finally checked my phone for the first time since everything unravelled. 28 messages, two calls.

Benny - 2:44pm
Wes omfg
Are u ok

I
Fuck

Benny - 2:45pm
When u get out of princ myer's call me
Are u ok?
Ur not suspended are u?
If u are Im skipping class with u

Benny - 2:46pm
Btw I found out what happened to Daniel
Broken nose and a fked up face
Dick deserved it tho
Praise bloody fuckin karma
Overheard that he's getting suspended

Missed call from - Benny - 2:50pm

Benny - 2:59pm
U still in myer's office?
U ok?
Hey I saw ur mum drive in she looked pissed
Also kinda scared
But mainly pissed
Not to scare u or anything
Im just freaking out here
For you

Benny - 3:03pm
Wes I saw Nico leave
He didnt look too good
This old lady came tho
She hit him on the head what a badass
Wes message me when u get out

Missed call from - Benny - 3:15pm

Benny - 3:18pm
Wes message me or Im gonna come over and make u message me
Im worried u ass

Seeing Benny's frantic messages, I could imagine his scrunched up face as his fingers clacked on his phone, the thought making me manage to release a small smile.

Wes - 3:47pm
Sorry
Im ok
Thank u
I'll talk to u later

As I typed, Benny's image lit up, three dots immediately forming in the corner of the screen. His reply came swiftly, my best friend's typing almost as fast as his mouth.

Benny - 3:47pm
Oh thank fk
I was gonna drive over
And u know I cant drive
Will I see u at school tomorrow?

Seeing Benny's last message, my heart sank in my hollowed chest. Quickly telling him about my suspension, and him sending a string of curses before saying that his mum is asking him to clean his room again but that he'll message me later, I steeled my nerves and called the person I wanted to speak to the most. Dialling Nico's number, I pressed the phone to my ear, eyes closing and forcing my breathing to calm.

In. Out.

The phone rang, but there was no reply.

In. Out.

"You have reached the voicemail of - Nico - *Please leave a message after the tone."*

In.

My heart sank as the automated voice quietened and a drawn-out beep stabbed my ear. Sniffling, I hung up the phone after listening to the silence for a few seconds, putting my phone down beside my head.

"Fuck," I cursed, rubbing my worn eyes with the neck of my hoodie. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

I stared at my phone, screen dark and silent. When it neither lit up nor beeped, I wearily sat up, pulling the blankets off my face. Looking at myself in the mirror across from me, I realised that I looked as low as I felt. Face bloated and eyes red, body swathed in dark colours that matched the skin in the hollows under my eyes, I slapped my cheeks, the skin stinging.

What's wrong with you?

An unsightly grimace etched into my face, I quickly stood up, grabbing a spare blanket from the armchair in the corner of my room and throwing it over the floor length mirror, obscuring my face from view.

"Mum, what are you doing?" I heard Jamie ask, voice slightly muffled by my closed door. Stiffening at their voices outside the door, I didn't move as mum spoke.

"I... I'm bringing him something to eat," mum said. Following her words were two light taps on the door, and her tentative voice wafting through.

"Wesley, I was worried you'd be hungry... I'll leave you some food outside, okay? I have to go to work now, I only got clearance to come late. We... We need to talk tomorrow, okay honey? I love you." There was the sound of a tray being lowered onto the wooden floor and some retreating footsteps. When silence returned, I carefully opened my door, seeing a sandwich cut into four slices and a glass of juice sitting at my feet. Pulling it in, hand

over my mouth to stifle my sob, I managed to close my door before collapsing to my knees.

"I'm sorry," I whispered against the door, my tears pooling at my chin before dripping onto the tray at my knees.

What's wrong with you?

I really can't do anything right.

Mouth shaking and tears still falling, I ate my sandwich like that; kneeling on the floor, a slobbering mess, and absolutely hating myself more with every bite. When I finished the last morsel and every single drop of the juice, my phone rang loudly on my bed. Stumbling my way over and fumbling with the screen, I answered breathlessly.

"Hel-"

"Wes, sorry I missed your call," Nico said quickly, breathing a little heavy. His voice, its deep timbre and slightly rough edges made my heart ache. "Bell was grilling me, and- Wes. Wes, Wes... are you crying?"

A hiccup escaped my lips, making me clamp my hand across it yet again.

"Babe, don't cry," Nico said, his words stretched thin, pleading. "Please."

"I'm sorry," I wailed, "I'm so sorry! It's my fault that you... you... you got expelled! Nico, what do we do?! E-Everyone knows, a-and you're hurt even though it wasn't your fault. You were protecting me again a-and this happened. I'm sorry. What do I do? I don't know what to do! I-I can't even stop crying like you want me to! Nico, what's wrong with me?"

Nico was silent, even the sound of his breathing stopping. Then, a long exhale, a troubled cough.

" *Wes,"* Nico said, voice raw. "Wes, there's nothing wrong with you."

"You can't *say* that!" I retorted, voice strained. "If it wasn't for me, you wouldn't have fought Daniel! I couldn't even... stand up for you with

Principal Myers. Nico, I couldn't do anything for you. I-I heard him call you useless, but he should've been saying that to *me* ."

"Wes, you know, you're starting to piss me off," Nico said, his words slapping me in the face.

What's wrong with you?

Hearing my silence, Nico sighed.

"Wes, don't misunderstand," Nico said, waiting for a response. When he was only met with silence, he sighed again. "Fine, just listen to me then. I don't know where you got the idea that this whole mess was your fault, but knowing your dense-ass brain, I'm not really surprised." With Nico's words, a strangled sound left my throat, making him snort.

"Good to know that you're still listening," Nico said, a small smile in his words. "Wes, none of this was your fault. Sure, I confronted that dick because he was talking shit about you, but that was only because he was being a fucking asshole in the first place, so don't go giving yourself all the credit."

"But... what you told Myers... about me not being involved, that's not true," I said, voice small.

"Hm, I think I actually said that you were trying to stop the fight," Nico said, chuckling. "Which was cute. I mean, not that I liked seeing you hugging Daniel's arm like that, or seeing you put yourself in danger again, but I appreciated the gesture." Pausing for a second, Nico then let out a grunt of disgust. "Actually, no I really hated seeing you like that. You should go shower, babe. You've probably got his blood on you."

"Nico, this is *serious* ," I whined, laughing despite myself.

"I am being serious," he said, dropping his voice to enunciate his point. "It's probably in your hair."

"Nico, I probably have *your* blood in my hair, too," I frowned. "Are you... are you okay? I should've asked earlier, sorry. Really sorry. Fuck, I'm sorry."

"I'm fine, I'm fine," Nico assured me, voice quickening its pace, the boy clearly worried I was about to cry again, though with the amount of tears I had shed today, I was sure my tanks were empty. "Bell's punch hurt more than Daniel's."

"I heard about that, from Benny," I said, Nico humming at that. "Was she mad...?"

"She was," Nico replied, "but she got over it after she hit me. To be honest, I think she was a bit happy when I told her about why I got into trouble in the first place. And especially when I told her that the other guy looked worse."

"Nico, you can't expect me to believe that she was 'fine' with you getting *expelled* ," I breathed, shaking my head incredulously. "Nico, getting expelled is not *'fine* '."

"Maybe not for you, but it is for me," Nico said, voice thoughtful. "Wes, you're smart. Not with some things, but you *are* smart. I know that I've got a certain... reputation, but you do too. Wes, everyone knows you're the smartest person in the grade - hell, the *school* . I know you don't see it, but you have so much going for you. I barely show up to classes, and sure, getting expelled sucks, but it's not the end of the world for me." Letting his words sink in, I could only reply with the first thought that came to my mind.

"Did you just call me smart *and* dumb at the same time?" I whispered, Nico letting out an uncontrolled laugh, falling into hysterics.

"That's the only thing you got out of that? Really, Wes? I think you just proved my point."

Groaning at my boyfriend's words, I suddenly noticed that my shoulders felt lighter. Even after crying, even after reprimanding myself for all the stupid

things I've done, getting insulted by Nico in his velvety voice somehow lifted my spirits. Just. Like. That.

"I hate you," I said, the lie surprisingly sweet on my tongue. Nico chuckled, the sound rumbling through my ear and straight through to my toes.

"Sure, babe. I love you too."

Even if it was just for a moment, a breath, an elusive, fleeting second, I felt that things may be okay.

Just maybe.

A/N: Hitting you guys with that speedy surprise update! :)

FORTY-FIVE

A few days had passed since my suspension. While the storm had passed, the aftermath it left in its wake was still a sore wound. As the weekend passed, Jamie was basically a watch dog, making sure that I couldn't leave my home since, not only was I suspended, I was also grounded. In those two days, since Nico used his newfound freedom to work without worries, I focused on powering through the class content for the next week. However, as Monday rolled by, my momentary enthusiasm to study had fizzled out.

Even though spring had begun, the days were still cold. Not finding it appropriate to turn on the heating during the spring despite the chill, I sat on my bed wrapped up in my blankets, eyes drifting in and out of my English literary text. The small black words were blurred as I struggled to maintain my concentration, a plethora or other things on my mind.

Groaning and my last thread of patients snapping, I threw my book across the room, the wad of paper slapping against the edge of my desk and onto the floor. Pulling out my phone, I flicked through Benny's messages, my friend messaging me every ten minutes complaining about how school is absolutely shit and that he's contemplating starting a fight to get suspended alongside me. Though in jest, his words still warmed my heart, his implied intention clear.

Lying on my bed, mind listless but body flaccid, I scrolled aimlessly through my phone. Since it was still early in the day, I was sure that Nico was still resting, especially since he worked a late shift at the bar last night. My heart fluttered when I saw his latest message, which was sent long after I had fallen asleep last night.

Nico Beckett - 2:57am
Im home, babe
Good night
Love you

Smiling to myself, I tenderly stroked my finger across his last words, longing in my belly. Rolling onto my stomach, I began typing a response to Nico, but was interrupted by four successive knocks on my door.

Knock. Knock, knock, knock.

"Wes, we need to talk." Jamie's voice was crisp even through the door, and I swallowed nervously, unable to respond to her. It would be a lie to say that I hadn't been actively avoiding the rest of my family over the weekend. Luckily, mum's shifts often meant that when she was home she was busy catching up on sleep, and Jamie had work on weekends so she was out of the house for most of the day. Unfortunately, on a Monday, Jamie didn't have any morning classes. Considering it was still only around 8 o'clock in the morning, I was surprised that Jamie was awake.

If she's awake, then it must be serious.

Clearly irritated by my lack of a response, there were a series of aggressive knocks against my door and a muttered string of profanities.

"Wes, come on, we need to talk. I'll wait for you in the lounge room." With that, I heard Jamie's footsteps trickle down the staircase, until it was silent again. Thick dread swelled inside me, my teeth gnawing at my lip. Inhaling deeply and shakily, I grabbed my phone and pulled on a jumper, somehow wanting it to protect me from Jamie's barbed words that were sure to come.

Walking down, the house felt colder than it used to. The blinds were still drawn, apart from one in the living room. Jamie sat on an arm chair by the window, the sunlight hitting her naturally brown locks and turning them auburn. The sunlight cast shadows on her angular face, which was pinched tight as she waited for me. Sensing me approach, my older sister jerked her head towards the couch across from where she sat.

Tentatively lowering myself onto the chair, Jamie didn't hesitate before speaking, eyes sharp.

"Wes, what's going on with you?" Jamie asked, her tone cutting into my skin. Leaning forward, elbows on her thighs, my sister narrowed her eyes

and stared at me unblinkingly. Though we shared the same eye colour, her eyes were far more intense than mine, clear and unrelenting.

"What do you mean?" I asked meekly, pulling the sleeve of my hoodie over my fisted hands, body shifting uncomfortable.

"Don't be ridiculous, Wes. You know *exactly* what I'm talking about," Jamie said, throwing her hands up in frustration. "Wes, it's almost like you've become a different person recently! You never used to go out at night, and these days we don't even know where you run off to! And you never cause trouble at school, but now you're getting involved fist fight? Wes, you used to get anxious when you got a cold and missed class, and now you're suspended!" Jamie's words grew louder with every breath she took, her hands waving in the air as her body failed to restrain her anger. With every arc her hands made, I shrunk further and further into the soft fabric of the couch, hoping it would swallow me whole.

"And Wes, you... you never used to speak to us like this," Jamie said, pointing her index finger at me accusingly. "Mum told me what you said do her the other day, about her... judgement. That was low, Wes. You would've known how much that would hurt her, after everything that's happened, and you still said it. The old you never would've said something so hurtful. Is this because of the divorce? Is that why you're acting out? Why would you say something like that to her?"

The old you.

The old me.

Who was that, exactly? Who was the Wesley that was too afraid to accept who he was, the Wesley that lied to others so he could maintain the lie he spun himself? A Wesley who tiptoed through life, living every day half heartedly, never tripping because he was too afraid to walk on the jagged cracks in the sidewalk. A Wesley that didn't sleep with Nico Beckett that one, fateful night that changed everything.

Yes, the Wesley before Nico.

"Wesley, are you even listening?" Jamie snapped, clicking her fingers in front of my face, the sound smacking against my ears. Blinking at her, I could see that my sister's restraint was wearing thing, and the way her body was coiled tight with energy made her seem like she was about to leap over the coffee table between our legs and slap me senseless.

"I'm listening," I replied weakly, voice scratchy as I sniffled, leg shaking nervously.

"Then answer my question," Jamie said, letting out a strained breath. "Why did you say that to mum?"

"I didn't... I didn't mean to," I said, face pale with regret. "I was angry, I wasn't thinking. I just got mad when she started saying all that stuff about Nico, an-"

" *Nico* ," Jamie spat, his name grating on her lips. "He's the one from the bowling alley, isn't he? Wes, didn't I tell you to stay away from him? I told you he was just trouble, and you didn't listen to-"

"Of course I didn't listen to you!" I said, words ripping out of my throat as I sat up in my chair, hands gripping my knees. My knuckles grew white as I tensed, Jamie's mouth snapping shut with a click of her teeth. "Why would I listen to you when you don't know anything about him?"

"Wes, he beat up a kid just yesterday so badly he had to get his nose realigned! And not to mention, he did pulverise that guy - his *friend* - at the bowling alley! Wesley, every time you get involved with him someone gets hurt, what else am I supposed to think?!" Jamie said, giving me a challenging look, eyes ablaze.

"Jamie, Nico's not like that! He has his reasons, he doesn't just go around punching people for the sake of it," I gritted out, shaking my head.

No, Nico has only started fights for me. Always for me.

"Then tell me, Wes," Jamie said, voice like steel. "Tell me how *Nico* really is. What reason could he possibly have to hurt people like that?"

"He..." I started, floundering on my words. Jamie's raised brow seemed to mock me as she saw me fumble, words clogged in my throat. Like every time before, my words seemed to embed themselves in the flesh of my throat, scratching and scraping as they struggled to remain silent.

No, not again. You can't do this to Nico again. Just. Say. It.

"See, Wes, you can't even justify hi-"

"He started the fight because of me," I said, fingers digging into my skin. "The guy he fought, he and his friends, they were talking shit about me, and-"

"What?" Jamie interrupted, eyes widening in shock, her body flinching at my words. "What do you mean they were saying things about you?"

"I meant exactly what I said!" I said, rolling my eyes slightly at her shock. "I... I tried to tell that you Principal Myers, and mum was there, but everyone just brushed me off, blaming everything on Nico."

I should've made them listen. I should've yelled, screamed, and forced them to listen to the truth.

I didn't then, but I could now.

"What were they saying, Wes?" Jamie asked, brow now crinkled with worry, her hands resting on her lap, fingers nervously twisting together rhythmically.

"They..." I started, swallowing thickly.

Say it. You can say it.

"They... Alyssa... and Daniel..."

Just say it, Wes.

"They were calling me..." I said, closing my eyes as my fisted hands clenched, nails digging into my skin.

Say it.

"A fag," I whispered, the word quivering as it left my lips. The syllables flitted through the air, echoing around the room despite being so soft. When the words dropped onto the carpet, long since falling from my mouth, Jamie was still deathly silent. Outside, there were the muted sounds of cars honking and dogs barking, the rattle of the neighbour's door and the rustle of the trees. Inside this room, however, were just the sounds of my heart beating.

Prying my eyes open, I cast away the darkness to find Jamie staring at me. Though her trembling irises, the same brown as mine, were looking at me, they seemed to go right through my body. Her mouth was open, though no air passed through them as she continued to stare, her mind spinning.

Then, mouth snapping shut and throat gulping, Jamie stood up from the chair and walked over to me. Grabbing me under the shoulders to hoist me up as well, my legs like jelly, she clamped her hands around my shoulders, giving them a frantic shake.

"Wes, you were being bullied?!" Jamie seethed, shaking me again. "Why didn't you tell us?! We could've talked to your principal, we could've explained to them why you were caught up in that mess!"

"How could I?!" I cried out, pushing her hands off me. "The mess with dad, and with everything going on, when could I? Everyone already has so much to worry about, when could I tell you?"

Jamie took a step back from me, guilt clouding her eyes. Dropping her hands from where I slapped them off my shoulders, Jamie hugged her elbows, as if my words gave her a sudden chill.

"Wes... You didn't think you could tell us?" Jamie asked, a little hurt. "You know you could always tell us anything. You used to tell us everything."

Laughing bitterly, I gave my sister a sullen shake of my head.

"Jamie, if I told you that Nico only fought them because of the things they said to me, would you have believed me?" I asked, giving my sister a weak smile.

"Of course I-"

"Jamie, you and mum, you both think of him as a good-for-nothing and a bad influence. Even when I tried to tell you it wasn't his fault, you just say that I'm 'acting out'. You... You said there was something *wrong* with me," I said, voice dropping as I swallowed the itch creeping up my throat, eyes growing hot. "How can I tell you anything when every time I do, something is wrong with me?"

Jamie's eyes began to grow red as she tried to fight back the tears in her eyes. My sister, who has probably cried only one handful of times in her life, gave me a sad look as she wiped her sleeve across her face, sucking in a tight breath.

"Wes, you know we didn't mean it like that," Jamie said, voice pleading. "There's nothing wrong with you. We were just worried that you were falling in with a bad crowd, since you were always so gentle, and kind, and, well, not like me." Jamie managed to chuckle a little at her words, sniffling as she rubbed her reddened eyes again.

"A bad crowd?" I asked, frowning at her choice of words. "Jamie, how many times do I-"

"Wes, Wes, sorry, I phrased that wrongly," Jamie said, waving her hands in front of my in a bid to calm me down. Sighing, Jamie collapsed back into couch beside me, running her hand through her hair. Seeing me lower myself into the couch next to her, Jamie gave me a small smile, which soon dropped from her face as she groaned. "I guess I've been kind of a shit sister lately, haven't I?"

"Kind of," I said, corners of my mouth twitching upwards. "But I've been a crappy brother as well, so I guess it evens out."

"Nah, I think I still owe you some credit," Jamie admitted, her smile widening at my words. "If I listen... you know, *properly* listen, will that help pay off my debt?" Jamie gave me a long, hopeful look, teeth nibbling on her lip unconsciously. Nodding at her proposal, I saw her shoulders release as she exhaled, leaning forward intently. "Then... Then tell me about what happened, with the fight."

Sighing, I rubbed at my aching temples, thinking back on the fight the other day.

"Well, I already told you that Alyssa and Daniel were calling me... *that* , and Benny tried to step in, but you know Benny, he's not really built to deal with that sort of thing." Jamie let out a snort at that, but didn't say anything, allowing me to continue.

"Daniel was getting a bit more aggressive when we tried to get away, and Nico stepped in before he could really do anything to us," I said, heart swelling at the memory or Nico's strong back, his arm between me and anything that tried to hurt me.

"Why would he do that, though?" Jamie asked, coughing slightly. "I know that you... hold him in high regard, but why would he get involved? Are you... friends?"

Oh.

Jamie's question slapped me in the face. Even though I had told her that Alyssa and Daniel had called me a homophobic slur, she hadn't put two-and-two together. In her mind, calling me a fag was the same as calling me any other derogatory name. She hadn't realised that they used that specific word because I was, actually...

Gay.

Seeing my hesitance, Jamie nudged my shoulder with hers, urging me to continue. I had a choice to make, one that someone stole from me earlier. I could come out, now, by choice. Or I could pretend, like I had always done.

"Yeah, Nico's my friend," I said, Jamie nodding slowly. I could tell she was still apprehensive about Nico's character, so before I spoke the next words, I took in a few slow breaths, forcing my heart to settle.

Be honest.

"He's my friend, but... he's also my boyfriend," I said, Jamie freezing. It took her a moment to turn towards me, neck stiff and eyes wide, her mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water.

"Boy... friend?" Jamie breathed, her hand flying to her mouth as she stared at me, shock written all over her body. Taking advantage of her silence, I continued to speak, the words tumbling out of my now that the first drop had been spilled from my lips.

"He's my boyfriend, Jamie," I said, heart thundering. "I-I know it's shocking, and hard to believe - trust me, I hardly believed it until recently, but it's real. He's... Jamie, I really love him, so when you and mum were saying those things about him, I just couldn't hold it in. I really do lov-"

"Wes," Jamie said, turning to me seriously. Startled by her curt voice, unease settled inside me once again.

"Y-Yeah?" I stuttered, Jamie taking my hand in hers.

"You can't tell mum. At least, not yet," Jamie said, my heart dropping and shattering on the ground.

"What? Why?" I asked, voice cracking. "Will she... not accept me? Do... Do *you* not accept me?" At the thought of my family not accepting me because of my sexuality, of shunning because of who I loved, nausea swept over me like a tidal wave. The colour fell from my cheeks, Jamie noticing the sickening expression on my face instantly, pulling me into a tight embrace.

"Wes, I don't care about whether you're gay or not. You're my stupid kid brother, that wouldn't change because you're attracted to boys," Jamie said, my head dropping onto her shoulder, the fabric there muffling the hiccups of my sobs. "But mum..."

"M-Mum's never had a problem with gay people before," I stammered as we pulled back from each other, Jamie using her sleeve to wipe away the tears and mucous from my face. "Why can't I tell her?"

"Wes, it's really best not to tell her, b-"

"Why can't I tell her?!" I cried, terrified and exhausted. "Why can't I tell my own mother that I'm *gay* ?!"

Thump.

From the archway connecting the foyer to the lounge room, a bag of groceries spilled onto the ground. Looking towards the source of the noise, the tears in my eyes stopped flowing when I saw mum standing there, her hands over her mouth.

A mixture of expressions flickered through her eyes, all ones that I didn't want to see. Jamie swore under her breath, squeezing my hand quickly before getting up to hastily step towards mum. Mum didn't even look at her daughter as she stared at me, like she was seeing someone for the first time.

"Mum...?" I asked, getting up to take a step towards her. When I did so, her left leg stumbled back, her head shaking slightly.

"No," mum said, shaking her head, taking another step back.

Step.

Step .

"Mum, don't freak out," Jamie said, placing her hands on mum's arm gently. "Mum, this is different. Wes..."

" *Wes isn't like dad* ."

A/N: Eek I'm starting to even surprise myself with how fast I'm getting these chapters out :) Probably because writing has become my number one procrastination tool to get out of studying, tbh. But, thinking about it, if I manage to write a lot now, I won't have to worry about it during the actual exam period, right? *Right* ?! (Excuse me while I lie to myself like Wes did to himself for about 30 chapters oop-). Back to the point though, I can't guarantee that chapters will be released as regularly as they have been, but hopefully these early chapters will make up for it :')

As always, thank you so much for reading, it really means the universe to me x

FORTY-SIX

The fan above my head whirred lazily, casting lines of moonlight against the ceiling. Nico's house was quiet, with only the sound of Nico's breaths audible to my ears. While everything contained within the four walls of his room was calm, I alone was a storm of emotions, my mind unable to push what happened earlier from my mind.

Shaking my head, as if physically rattling it will make the memories dribble from my ears, I turned to Nico. My fingers twitched as I ached to grab onto his body, to press myself against the broad expanse of his back and breathe in the scent of him. However, Nico was fast asleep, and I knew that suddenly having a fully grown boy suddenly squeezing around him would definitely rouse him from his slumber. Instead of imitating a boa constrictor on his prone form, I carefully reached out and gingerly held onto the hem of his shirt with my thumb and forefinger. Although Nico rarely wore shirts to bed, I had scolded him earlier about how the nights were still cold and he would catch a virus, the boy begrudgingly throwing on a shirt he found under a pile of clothes on his armchair.

For what seemed like an hour and change, I just stayed in this position, wanting to feel more of his skin on my skin, but not wanting to wake him up either. It wasn't until Nico let out a grumble, throat raw, his body rolling over to face me.

My noise of surprise was smothered by his clothed chest, his arms wrapping around my simultaneously to pull me closer. Lips resting on my head, Nico let out a sleep-hazed sigh.

"How long have you been awake for?" Nico asked, his words a little hard to decipher through his sleep-riddled grumble. A let out a whisper of a laugh, embarrassed, wrapping my arms around his middle. Face hidden in his embrace, I shook my head.

"Not that long," I said, Nico snorting with disbelief. Ignoring my lie, Nico spoke against the crown of my head again, left hand running up and down my back idly.

"Thinking about it again?"

"Hard not to," I said, clearing my throat as my words cracked noticeably.

"Wes isn't like dad," Jamie said.

Not like... dad?

Jamie's words slammed against the walls of my skull, my brain turning into mush as it tried to comprehend what it just heard. Not like dad? Like dad? Different? Jamie's didn't outright say it, but it was clear what she was insinuating. Dad not only cheated on mum with someone. He cheated on her with a man *. My mind reeled at the thought, brain in complete anarchy.*

If dad left mum for a man, does that mean he was always attracted to men? Was he ever attracted to mum? Was he gay, or bi, or something else entirely?

Was he like me? Or was I like him?

Mum's face turned ashen, her whole body shaking as she took a step back, and then another and another. Her eyes never left me, the expression held inside them striking me to the core.

Abhorrence. Fear. Betrayal.

It was like she was looking at dad.

"M-Mum," I choked out, stretching out a hand. Mum just shook her head at my words, eyes red as tears began to slip from them, down her gaunt cheeks and over the fingers pressed against her mouth. She didn't make a sound as she quickly turned, forgetting the groceries scattered on the floor, forgetting to even take off her soiled shoes. Tracking black dirt up the stairs, mum disappeared, the heavy slam of a door making me flinch.

Jamie stood there, shocked for a moment, before quickly turning to me. Pressing her palms against my cheeks firmly, Jamie forced me to look at her, pulling my gaze away from mum's retreating footprints.

"Wes, Wes, it'll be fine, okay? I'm going to talk to mum, she's just in shock about everything that's going on. Just give her some time, I'll talk to her, and everything will be fine, yeah?" Jamie chanted, almost sounding like she was trying to convince herself.

Nodding mechanically at my sister's words, the girl let out a heavy, frantic breath, hugging me once more.

"Wes, it'll probably be best for you to go to get out of here for now, to give mum some space to think about everything," Jamie said, glancing back at the staircase. Her words, though spoken with good intentions, only twisted the knife inside my heart around and around, pushing it in a little deeper.

"Mm," I murmured, mouth unable to open, because if it did I was afraid that a sob would escape.

"Can you go to Benny's? Or... or Nico's?" Jamie asked, and I nodded again, stiff and defeated. "Okay, good. I'll go and calm mum down, message me when you get to their place, okay?" Letting me go from her frazzled hug, Jamie gave me one last look, before following mum's clear footsteps upstairs. I left soon after, walking in the opposite direction.

"If it's hard not to think about it, then I think you need a distraction," Nico said, voice suggestive as he nudged his knee between my thighs. Shivering at his words, flustered, I lightly hit him in the chest with my fist. Nico grunted in response, though he didn't retract his leg from between mine, instead just leaning his head back to look at me in the eyes. Blue orbs squinting to see in the dark, Nico giving me a teasing look.

"Not in the mood, babe?" Nico asked, making me blush and shake my head.

"Nico, it's like... three in the morning," I said, raising a brow as my point was proven when Nico yawned loudly. Chuckling at my words, Nico mumbled a "yeah, unfortunately," and gave his leg another wiggle, but

didn't push any further. The two of us didn't speak for a short time after, Nico drifting in and out of sleep, though he seemed to wake himself up every time he dozed off.

"Nico, just sleep if you want to sleep," I said softly, reaching up to cover his heavy-lidded eyes with my hand. Nico smiled, languidly reaching up to pull my hand down from his eyes, revealing their blueness to me once again.

"I can't just sleep when you're lying here like this," Nico said, yawning again. "If you stay up, I'll stay up." The moment the words left his mouth, his eyes began to flutter closed again, making me roll my eyes, though an affectionate grin graced my features.

"Mhmm," I hummed, Nico's nose crinkling as he peeled open one eye, grumbling at the smug expression on my face.

"Talk to me, then," Nico said, clearing his throat, shifting his body weight to prop his head up with his hand. "It'll help me stay awake with you."

"You're an idiot," I said, my heart melting into a puddle in my chest, oozing into every crevice of my body.

"I said talk to me, not insult me," Nico huffed, taking the opportunity to pinch my nose.

"What do you want to talk about, then?" I asked, my voice nasally as Nico continued to squeeze my nose, only letting go after I had spoken.

"What do you want to do in the future?" Nico asked after pondering for a moment. Surprised by his serious question, I blinked as I gave Nico an open-mouth stare, like a deer caught in the headlights. At my expression, Nico let out a loud snort, now far more awake than just moments before.

"The future...?" I echoed, Nico nodding slowly.

"Wes, you're smart. You could probably get into any course you want to for uni, but I've never heard you talk about what you want to do," Nico said, resting his arm across my waist. Ticking things off his fingers, Nico

continued. "Let me guess... Law? Medicine? Finance? Something science-y? Oh, no, wait, I've got it."

Nico paused before continuing.

" *House husband?* " Nico dropped, a shrill noise erupting from my mouth, which spluttered everywhere.

"You... You... Don't say stuff like that!" I was sure my face was bright as a firetruck at this point, though I was also immensely grateful for the darkness cloaked over us which would help subdue my redness.

"Okay, okay! Shit, I'm just kidding babe!" Nico said, wiping his eyes as he tried to control his breaths, which still wavered as his chest shook with residual laughter. "Well, only kind of kidding."

"Nico," I said warningly, my heart flipping. His words did more to me then I let on, and considering how red and flustered I was on the outside, one could only imagine the state of my mind internally. All in a flash, his one word had sent my mind whirling five, ten, fifteen, twenty years into the future. There were many scenarios, of different jobs and cities, but all of them shared one thing in common; they all had Nico in them. When everything in my life was so uncertain, there was one thing that was ironclad.

Throat suddenly welling with emotion, I had to cough to clear my throat, hoping that Nico wouldn't notice the stuffiness in my voice.

"I haven't really thought about the future that much, but maybe something related to science," I said, hoping Nico wouldn't dwell on the *other* option too much. He didn't, and just nodded thoughtfully. "I don't really know though. What about you, Nico?"

"Me?" Nico mused, rolling onto his back, his arm splayed. Seeing the space he opened up on his side, I hid my smile and shifted closer to him, slotting myself in the me-shaped sheets. My head rested on Nico's chest, palm flush against it, rising and falling with his breaths.

"Yeah, you. What do you want to do?"

"Cook... I think," Nico said, voice a little hesitant. After thinking about it for a little longer, his words settling, he repeated it again, firm and determined. "Yeah, I want to cook. Open my own restaurant, that kind of thing."

The image of Nico in the kitchen, relaxed smile on his face and skilled hands chopping ingredients, I could easily imaging him the same way in his own restaurant. Maybe an Italian place, one that wasn't too big or too small, but was always packed full to the brim because of its chef's good reputation.

Yeah, I could see it, clear as day.

"Sounds nice," I said honestly, Nico grinning.

"Yeah? I was also thinking that my restaurant could be a cover for some shady business my 'gang' was involved in. And they'd use the freezer to lock in people who didn't pay up or stash drugs, and I'd beat people up at the back all day long. Everyone knows I do this on a daily basis anyway," Nico said, joking. Snorting a little at his jab at the rumours circling around our school, his hand continued to rub circles around my back comfortingly.

"Hm, but Wes, if you don't know about what you want to do that far into the future, what about now? You know, with school... I don't know how I feel about you going back there by yourself." Nico's voice was soft, yet there was a layer of quiet anger simmering on the top. Through his hands, which held me a little closer and tighter, I could feel his worry for me, right down to my toes.

"I'm going back," I said without hesitation, Nico straining his neck to look at me, brow creased. Letting out a noise of exertion as I raised myself up, arms holding me above Nico, I pressed a chaste kiss against the side of his mouth. "Like you said, Nico. I'm smart, really bloody smart, and I have so much going for me. So, I'm going back to school, even if... even if other people are like *that* ." It was clear who I was referring to, Alyssa and Daniel's faces coming into mine. Sofia's face also drifted in, though it was

pushed straight out when Nico latched his hand around my neck to pull me down into a longer, deeper kiss.

"I'm proud of you, babe," Nico murmured against my lips. "Really worried as well, but also proud."

"Mm," I sighed against Nico's lips, a small giggle escaping my mouth as Nico pulled at my body until I was hovering completely over him. With a cheeky gleam in his eyes, Nico pinched my ass.

"So, now that we're both wide awake, if we want to get back to sleep we've gotta get rid of some energy," Nico said, voice dropping seductively as his knee rose upwards, brushing against the sensitive spot between my thighs. Reacting almost immediately, I didn't manage to get any words out as Nico flipped the two of us over, smirking.

"Luckily, I know exactly how to tire us out, babe."

A/N: This is probably the last speedy update I can manage to deliver for now, I've really gotta actually study for my exams hahahabutreallyI'vescrewedmyselfoverhahaha. Thanks for all the support and lovely comments you guys have left, I always have a good chuckle reading over them :)

FORTY-SEVEN

"Good morning," Bell chirped, making me stop in my tracks. The elderly woman glanced up from where she was flipping pancakes, giving me a small smile as her eyes crinkled in the corners. Bell hadn't been home the night before - on a date with someone from her lawn bowls club according to Nico - so seeing her this morning immediately slapped the consciousness out of my head. Bell chuckled with amusement as I stood there, limbs frozen stiff and mouth open wide. "Come now, don't be shy, honey. Take a seat, the pancakes should be ready soon."

"O-Okay," I said, hastily taking a seat at the kitchen counter. Glancing down at my clothes, I grimaced, cheeks heating in embarrassment. Without any of my own clothes, I had borrowed some of Nico's, and the over-sized fit of them made it glaringly obvious. Peeking up at Bell, who had since turned back to focus on her sizzling blueberry pancakes, I fiddled with the hem of Nico's hoodie, feeling the need to say something.

"U-Um, thank you for letting me stay here all the time," I stammered, kicking myself under the table at the shaky rhythm of my words. Bell turned back to me again, nodding happily.

"Oh, no thanks is necessary! Nicolas always seems happier when you're here, so I'm happy that you keep him company," Bell said, lips quirking up as she looked me up and down, her grin only widening. "Hopefully my Nicolas makes you happy too?"

"He does!" I squeaked out, nodding a little too enthusiastically. Bell let out another laugh at my response, seemingly pleased.

"Good! Oh, but I can't believe he's still in his room sleeping while you're already up and about! He should be preparing refreshments for you," Bell said, clicking her tongue. Smiling a little at the memory of Bell scolding Nico all those months ago for not offering me refreshments when I visited, I

found myself relaxing in my seat as Bell muttered something to herself about Nico's lack of hospitality.

"It's alright, he needs his rest," I said, Bell giving me a sly look over her shoulder.

" *Oh* ? Was he busy with something last night?" Bell asked, her mouth twitching as she tried to suppress her grin. Immediately grasping her meaning, my breath became lodged in my throat, causing me to cough. Covering my heated face with my hands, I tried to look anywhere but at the woman whose shoulders were now shaking with amusement.

Oh, she definitely knows why Nico was busy last night.

"Talking! We were just talking. About things. You know, important things," I frantically said, chuckling pathetically.

At my words, which were clearly lies, Bell just hummed and nodded, her mannerisms so much like her grandson's. Her hands were nimble as she swept the pancakes onto a plate, garnishing the sides with some sliced fruit. Gingerly stepping towards me, sliding the plate across the counter along with a bottle of syrup, Bell cleared her throat.

"Wesley, I don't mean to overstep, but Nico told me a little about your situation..." Bell said, giving me a warm yet sad look, resting her hand on mine.

"Oh," I replied awkwardly, throat scratching.

"I don't know if Nico's told you, but he... he can probably relate a lot more than you think," Bell said, squeezing my hand. "His parents..."

"He... He told me, about his parents," I said softly, Bell's eyes widening in surprise. She seemed genuinely shocked for a moment, head tilting to the side as she looked at me in wonderment.

"He did?" Bell asked, head shifting to lean towards the other side. I nodded again, answering her question, but only made her blink a few more times.

After thinking through things for a few more silent moments, Bell pulled my hand up softly, bringing her other hand to clasp it tightly. Her eyes seemed to sparkle - with tears or amazement, I couldn't quite tell. "He must really treasure you then. I'm glad."

"I'm... sorry?" I said, gulping. "I don't quite..."

"That boy," Bell said, voice dipped in fondness. "Nicolas has never really been one to talk about himself to others, but especially not about his parents. They were always a sore topic for him, even with me. I know Nicolas looks a little scary on the outside, but I've seen him grow up and he's a gentle boy at heart. He's just... always closed off with other people. A little cold, you could say."

My heart ached a little as Bell spoke, her voice so tender and full of love. Her words made me think of the Nico I thought I knew at the beginning of the year, so distant and cold, his blue eyes piercing and hard. But, like Bell said, the *real* him was gentle, caring, protective. Warm.

"He's never brought friends home before," Bell continued, face lighting up as she looked up at me. "So you can imagine how happy he was when he invited you."

Unable to respond, my heart full and my stomach in knots, I could only squeeze Bell's hand silently, the message seeming to get relayed loud and clear when Bell smiled.

"You're not gossiping about me, are you?" Nico's voice called from the entrance to the kitchen, his form appearing moments after. His hair was still tousled with sleep, and he had only bothered to put a pair of tracksuit pants on, not bothering to cover his exposed chest. Bell rolled her eyes a little, letting go of my hand to give Nico a smack on his arm.

" *Nicolas* , it's rude to sleep in like that when you have guests over. Go pour him some juice to eat with his breakfast," Bell chastised, pushing him towards the fridge. It was now Nico's turn to roll his eyes, but did what his grandma asked of him anyway.

"Don't I get pancakes?" Nico asked, Bell letting out a huff.

"If you had woken up earlier you would have gotten some," Bell said, wiping her hands on a cloth before turning away from her grandson to look at me, her expression shifting to one of pleasantry. "Enjoy your breakfast, Wesley. I have to pop out now, but Nico here will look after you." Turning back to Nico again, Bell's brow was raised high and her finger wiggling in the air. " *Won't you, Nicolas.* "

"Yeah, yeah," Nico said, plucking the fork from my hand to quickly shovel the morsel of blueberry pancake skewered on it into his mouth, chewing happily. Bell threw her hands up, sighing.

"Don't yeah, yeah me, mister."

Smiling at their warm-hearted banter, I grabbed my stolen fork from Nico, popping some into my mouth. When I served myself another bite, I passed Nico the fork again, the boy grinning as he fed himself.

"Did you wanna leave by a certain time, babe?" Nico asked mid-chew, cutting a forkful of pancake before pressing it against my closed lips, which opened willingly.

"Do... Do I have to?" I sighed, mood souring slightly. The thought of going back home to where mum was probably still stewing over everything that transpired the day before made my appetite begin to wane, though Nico decided to make it his mission to feed me as much as he was feeding himself. After feeding me another forkful, Nico placed the utensil down on the now empty plate, leaning his long torso across the counter to kiss me briefly, his lips syrupy sweet.

"I know you can do it, Wes," Nico murmured gently, calming me. "And if anything happens, I'll be there to pick you up."

"Okay," I said, steeling myself.

"Good," Nico said, hopping back on his feet to walk around, pulling me by the arm. "But we've gotta shower before we go, babe. And maybe while

we're in there..." Nico said, wiggling his brow suggestively. Laughing at his expression, I shoved him playfully, shaking my head.

"Really, Nico?"

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Wearing the same clothes that I donned when running out of my house yesterday, apart from the jumper that Nico lent me before dropping me off at my house, I had to drag my weighted feet towards the front door. My nerves were frazzled, but I was sure that they would be worse without the scent of Nico's shampoo clinging to my hair and the smell of his cologne in his hoodie. Jamie had sent me texts saying that she's talked to mum, but didn't elaborate. Whether the talk changed mum's outlook on me and my sexuality or made it worse, I didn't know.

I wasn't sure if I wanted to know.

Everything Nico did for me - and *to* me, I suppose - last night had only provided a momentary distraction. Now, walking up the steps that were once so welcoming, I only felt dread. Before I could even slot my keys into their notches, the front door was opened, Jamie revealing herself before me. It reminded me of that day at the beginning of the year. Back then, I had been so desperate to come home after waking up in Nico's sheets, everything a blur and haze of colour. Jamie's expression had been different back then too. Instead of the amused smirk she had painted on her face all those days ago, today she looked strained, but managed to give me a smile nonetheless.

Looking inside, the dirt marks rubbed into the ground had been cleaned, mum's shoes laid neatly by the side of the doorway. The blinds had been drawn, and some were even cracked open to allow some fresh air into the house. The dull brown boxes still sat against the wall, but the house no longer felt oppressed by their presence, the light cleaning everything it touched.

"Hey, little bro," Jamie said softly, ruffling my hair affectionately when I stepped inside. Swallowing thickly, I shot Jamie a nervous look.
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"Mum...?"

"In the kitchen," Jamie said, nodding her head towards the archway that hid the kitchen.

"Is she..." I asked, hoping Jamie could give me some insight into mum's current temperament. Sighing, Jamie squeezed my shoulder once, stepping to the side to allow me to pass.

"She's willing to listen. She's not happy... but she'll listen," Jamie said, my heart falling. "She loves you, Wes. It's just hard for her to separate that from everything going on with dad, so you just have to explain everything to her. Truthfully."

"I'll try," I said, letting out a wobbly breath, straightening my back.

"I'll be upstairs if you need me, okay?" Jamie said, turning towards the staircase. She soon disappeared, leaving me to my own devices. Without Jamie there, the house was silent, mum obscured by the wall between us.

It's okay, Wes.

"Breathe," I told myself, pulling the sleeves of Nico's jumped over my fingers. Pressing my fists to my face, breathing deeply, Nico's scent washed over me alongside a wave of calm.

Yes, it'll be okay.

Stepping around the corner, my eyes immediately fell onto mum's hunched back. Her posture was slumped, fatigue resting in every curve and fold of her form. Her hair was messily tied up at the base of her skull, her body swathed in thick fabric as she held on a cup of tea. There was no steam wafting from its rim, seemingly forgotten in her hands as she stared out the window.

Sensing me behind her, mum's back stiffened, her mug clattering on the table. A little tea sloshed out the sides and onto her hand, but since it had

cooled she merely shook off the droplets, little specks of brown dripping onto the wooden surface.

She didn't say anything as I approached, carefully stepping in front of her. I gulped when I seated myself in the seat across the table, neither the furthest nor the closest chair from her. The clock above the fridge ticked laboriously, and the sun dipped behind a patch of clouds in the sky, the room darkening slightly. Mum's fingers tapped at the side of her mug, her nails eliciting a bell-like chime from the porcelain. Her eyes, however, were still and trained on the droplets of tea she had spilled on the table, unable to meet my gaze.

"Mum," I murmured, my voice seeming to startle the woman, who twitched slightly at the noise. Her fingers stopped tapping on the mug, instead moving to fiddle with the string of the tea bag hanging off its side. I felt a little sick when I saw mum's mouth tighten into a thin line, her face looking as pained as I felt.

"Mum..." I repeated quietly, fingers picking at a piece of chipped wood on the edge of the table. The only sound that followed was the steady tick of the clock, the air in the room heavy and stagnant.

Breaking the silence, mum spoke, voice a quiver.

"Are you gay?" mum asked, voice devoid of emotion. The tight grip she had on the tea bag seemed to restrain her from releasing her emotions, which boiled behind her eyes. Under her heated gaze, the spilled tea seemed to evaporate. Unable to respond with a complete sentence, I responded with a nod and quiet "mm".

"When did you find out?" mum asked again, the end of her words cracking a little bit, her fear leaking from her throat.

"Earlier this year," I answered, heart aching. "I... I only really admitted it when we went to Sorrento."

Mum couldn't help but let out a small sob, her hand flying to her mouth. Her throat bob as she swallowed her cries, her head hanging low. The sound

of her muffled crying made my own tears begin to flow, the salty streams collecting at the tip of my chin and falling onto the surface of the table.

"Was is because of that boy? The one Jamie kept talking about," mum asked, voice high and scratchy. "Wesley, is he what made you like this?"

" *No!* " I shouted, my voice louder than I anticipated, scaring the both of us. I stammered a few times before continuing, hand fisting around the hem of Nico's jumper as I forced my voice to soften. " *No* , mum. No one 'made me like this'. Please don't blame him for anything. It's not his fault. It's *never* his fault. I... I'm sure I was like this before him, I just didn't want to admit it..."

"Then what about your father?" mum croaked, her voice darkening in colour at the very thought of him. "It must have been because of him, I'm sure of it! You... You were always so close to him... He must have... Under my nose..."

" *Mum!* Don't blame him!" I cried out, slapping my tears away to stare at her. Feeling my gaze on her change, mum finally looked up. Her eyes were red and bloodshot, and darkness swallowed up the skin beneath her eyes, which sagged lifelessly. "I'm sorry, mum. I know that you're m-mad, but I... I didn't want to be this way. I can't help it! I've been lying to everyone this whole time, but I can't any more, because I can't lie to myself! I-I'm sorry that I turned out like this, a-and you can blame dad for everything else, for what he did to you, but you can't blame him for *me* . I'm like this, not because of anyone else, but because of *me* . It's just who I am!"

"But I have to blame *someone!"* mum weeped, head falling into her hands. "It's the only thing I can do so I don't blame *myself* !"

...What?

Mum's shoulders heaved as she cried into her hands, her tears slipping down her wrists to mix with the tea.

"Blame... yourself?" I asked, voice raw. "Why... Why would you blame yourself?"

"How can I not?" mum spat, throwing her hands up in the air. "I didn't realise anything, not with your father, and not with you. I wasn't enough for him, and now you and Jamie, you both don't have a father! And you, Wes! I didn't know anything that was going on, I didn't even have a clue! Jamie told me what happened at school, the bullying... Oh *God* , Wes. This whole time, I've only been thinking about myself, I didn't even notice that all of this was happening to you! You've been going through all of this by yourself, and I wasn't there to help you! How can I not blame myself!"

Mum's words cut me right to the core, clamping my tears and my heart. Mum let out a shudder as her words seemed to knock the air out of her lungs, her hand dropping from the air to press against her chest. Fingers trembling, mum looked at me, her face tormented and filled with regret.

"Mum... You..."

"Wesley, I didn't tell you about your father, not only because I wanted to protect you, but because I wanted to protect myself. You two were so close, I... I thought that maybe you would side with him." Mum laughed sourly at the thought, the light sound terribly painful to our ears. "I thought that... maybe... you would see that I wasn't good enough, and that you wouldn't blame your dad for what he did, just like me," mum whispered, face twisting with disgust - not disgust for me, not even for dad. It was disgust for herself. "And... And since you're also... like him in *that* way, you only feel further and further away from me."

"Wes, you've so suddenly become someone else," mum said, mouth parting in a sad smile. "You stopped talking to me, sharing things with me. I thought that, 'ah, he's going to leave me too'. Even when you were figuring all of this out, you were doing it without me. You were doing *fine* without me. You shut us both out, me and Jamie, so we didn't know what was going on. That's why I was afraid. You... You seemed like you didn't need me more," mum admitted, rubbing her eyes with her sleeve.

Oh.

From behind the clouds, the sun began to drift back out again, a slither of sunlight seeping through the open windows. For the first time in a long

time, everything seemed clear. Both of us had been seeing everything through a keyhole; we could only see as far as our own perspective and our own troubles, blaming ourselves because that's all we could reach. Mum thought so lowly of herself that she became afraid of losing all she thought she had left, to the point that she pushed away anything that would break the bubble of normalcy she had built for herself. My suspension and barbed words had obliterated that bubble, leaving her reeling. On the other hand, I shut everyone out to hide a part of myself that I was so desperate to deny, only to have other people reject it the moment I embraced it. Lashing out to protect ourselves, safety in destruction, seemed to be something that ran in the family. If we had only had the nerve to open the door, we would've seen that there was more beyond the scope of the keyhole.

Getting up from my chair, pins and needles trickling down my limbs, I tentatively stepped towards mum, who looked up at me with despair.

When I was close enough, my feet brushing the legs of her chair, I wrapped my arms around her shoulders. A sob travelled through the entirety of her frail body at the contact, her head buried against my stomach and her arms around me, squeezing me with every fibre inside her.

"I'm sorry, honey," mum weeped, fingers digging into my back as she held me, a little painful but also relieving. "I'll try to do better, to *be* better. Honey, I never meant for you to feel like you couldn't talk to me, I'll always accept you, no matter what. I promise."

"I know," I hiccuped, voice nasally as my nose clogged with mucous. "Please don't cry, mum."

Mum laughed at my words, pulling back to rub her eyes again. Seeing my cheeks, damp and stained, she reached up to wipe at them too.

"You've grown up so well, you know that, right Wes?" mum said, cupping her palm on my cheek, warm to the touch. "I'm so proud of you, my strong, not-so-little boy." Seeing my eyes begin to water again with her words, mum chuckled, pinching my cheek. "Well, maybe still kind of little after all."

" *Mum* ," I groaned, laughing despite the tears.

"I know, I know," mum said, letting out a heavy breath, taking me by the hand. "Now, Wes. Let's get some fresh tea brewing, and have a proper talk. Hopefully with a lot less crying, I'm absolutely spent. I want to hear about *everything* , especially that boy. Nico?"

"You promise you're not going to... get angry at him?" I asked, head tilting to the side, causing mum to give me a stern look.

"I promised you already, Wesley. I'll do better."

Satisfied with mum's words, I lowered myself into the chair right beside her after turning the kettle on. Soon, with two hot cups of tea in our hands, I told her about Nico, about us, about everything.

Well, *almost* everything. Some things should just stay in the sheets.

A/N: Treated myself to a study break to write this chapter, and it turned out a little longer than usual :) I probably won't be able to update for about a week and a half, but once all of my tests and assignments are over I can focus more of my time and energy into this story (I'm so keen you guys have no idea).

Thank you for reading, and I'll see you in the next chapter! <3

Also, on a side note, I noticed that Chapter 25 (the smut chapter) has A LOT more views than my other chapters... Ya'll thirsty and I love it lmao

FORTY-EIGHT

"Mum, calm down," I pleaded, clasping my mum's shoulders to steer her away from where she was obsessively watching over the roast in the oven. There was a thin sheen of sweat on her brow, the heat radiating from the appliance casting an orange glow across her face.

"Wes, you were the one who told me that your boyfriend was a good cook," mum huffed, blowing a stray strand of hair from her face, stepping around my to begin obsessing over the salad she was preparing.

"Mum, it's fine, he's not picky with food," I groaned, wincing a little as she frantically chopped a cucumber into small pieces that were maybe a little too small. Mum whirled around at that, raising a brow, knife stopping mid air.

"You said that you had never tasted pasta better than his," mum said, the corner of her mouth twitching as she saw my face redden. Shaking her head and turning back to the slaughtered cucumber, mum continued. "We can't have him thinking that his boyfriend's family has no palate."

"Ooookay," I drawled, plucking a piece of cucumber from the chopping board and popping it into my mouth, mum giving me a sideways glance. I was about to try and steal another cucumber slice, but was pushed away from the food by Jamie, who was carrying a large bowl over her head.

"Move, move, move!" Jamie called out, almost knocking my forehead with the bowl.

"Jamie, what the hell," I grumbled, my sister snickering as she placed the large bowl onto the counter beside mum.

"You were in the way," Jamie grinned, kicking my with her foot. "Anyway, the kitchen is way too cramped for the three of us, so go and set the table or something." Flipping my sister a discreet bird behind mum's back, which

was returned by a much less discreet one from Jamie (the back of her head getting smacked by mum), I went to set the table.

Setting up three places like normal, I couldn't help but smile to myself as I clutched onto the fourth plate, stroking its rim as I carefully placed it beside my own.

Nico's place.

It has been a few days since the whole coming out debacle, and things had somewhat settled down. It had taken a good moment for mum to begin to say the word 'boyfriend' without sounding forced, but it hadn't taken her long to get over her initial apprehension to invite Nico to dinner to meet him officially. Butterflies flitted around in my stomach as I quickly set up the cutlery and napkins, my phone buzzing in my pocket as I lay down Nico's share.

Checking my phone, my heart flipped when Nico's face shone on the screen, a request for a video call blinking up at me. Smoothing my wayward hair down quickly before answering, my smile widened immediately when I saw Nico blinking back at me, a matching grin on his face.

"Babe," Nico said, switching the camera away from his face to show his full form in a floor-length mirror. "Is this okay?"

"What?" I asked, blinking a few times as Nico rolled his eyes, stepping closer to the mirror.

"My clothes," Nico said, as if he were stating the obvious. "Are they okay?" Looking away from his face and at his clothes, I noticed Nico wearing a button up shirt and freshly ironed jeans, his hair a little damp and freshly washed. Although he was always extremely handsome, he had never dressed as neatly as he did now, and it was as if I was seeing a whole new Nico. Nico tilted his head to the side and cleared his throat, a small smirk playing at his lips in the reflection. "Like what you see, Wes? You're staring."

"You... You're asking *me* about *your* outfit?" I asked, my chuckle laced with embarrassment at being caught staring. Nico sighed at my words, switching the camera back to his face, which was growing a little exasperated.

" *Yes,* I'm asking you. I'm going to dinner at *your* house, I need to know if I'm, you know, dressed appropriately," Nico replied, shrugging. The little crease in his brow and the way his blue eyes darted off to the side of the camera to glance at his figure in the mirror made my heart squeeze tightly.

"Nico, you don't have to, um, "dress appropriately", Nico. It's just a casual dinner," I said, hand pressing against my racing heart to try and still it.

"It's not..." Nico said, giving me a pointed look. "I'm meeting your family, Wes. It's important, especially since they don't really like me." Nico's mouth turned down at his own words, his camera switching away from his face as he seemingly threw it onto his bed. I heard the sound of fabric swishing, the white button down Nico had been wearing flying off the corner of the screen.

"Wait, I'm going to try on something else," Nico called loudly, and I stifled my snort, a little giddy.

"Nico," I spoke back, the top of his head peeking through the bottom of his camera. "I wanna see you."

"You wanna see me?" Nico asked, grinning. Slowly moving his body up, revealing the slope of his neck and the beginnings of his now bare chest, Nico wiggled a brow teasingly. "What *exactly* do you want to see, Wes?"

Gulping, I glanced around the dining room before quickly darting up to my room. I didn't need Jamie or mum to see me talking to my half naked boyfriend, who was hinting at my desire for a pre-dinner striptease.

"What are you willing to show me?" I asked, my grin mirroring Nico's as his phone dipped down slightly to reveal the chiseled indentations across his abdomen.

"Someone wants dessert a little early, hm?" Nico said, making me blush. Suddenly pulling his phone up closer to his face, blue eyes, shining, Nico's eyes softened. "But sorry, babe. I can't really meet your family with a boner. Now, is this shirt better, or this one?"

Groaning at my boyfriend's stinginess, I glanced between the two shirts Nico was holding - both button downs, and things he would look good in, though they weren't things that he would usually wear. Nico rarely wore shirts with long sleeves, either because his body usually ran hot and he wanted to display the inkings he had lining his arms. He only wore jumpers and coats when it was genuinely cold out, but when he was inside and warm they immediately came off. And now, here he was, wearing these restricting shirts because he thought they were "appropriate" for me. For my family. For *us* .

"Nico," I said, looking at my boyfriend fondly. Hearing the change of tone in my voice, Nico stopped staring at the shirts in his hands to look at me, head cocking to the side curiously. "You don't have to wear anything special, or... "appropriate". Just wear what you usually wear, that's more than enough." Nico opened his mouth, clearly to retort, but I shushed him with a short laugh. "Please?"

Nico looked at me for a long second, before sighing, throwing his shirts across the room.

"Fine," Nico sighed, giving me a pointed look, before running his fingers through his dark hair. "Do I need to do my hair?"

"Nico," I groaned. "You look good already, seriously calm down." My own words didn't even register until Nico chuckled, letting out a smug sound of affirmation.

"So honest today, babe," Nico teased, making me huff, though I couldn't stay too mad at him when he was smiling at me like *that* .

"Okay, shut up asshole. If you don't leave now you're going to be late," I said, a little glimmer of mischief in my voice. "And my mum doesn't like people who aren't punctual..."

"You're telling me *now* , Wes? Seriously?" Nico swore, giving me a look as I watched him hastily stride towards his wardrobe to pull out a fresh T-shirt. "Okay, I'm going to get ready. See you soon, babe."

"Mm," I said, Nico hanging up soon after, leaving me in silence. After talking with Nico, there were new butterflies in my stomach. From downstairs, I heard a few clashes as pans probably flew, and Jamie's loud screech, the words muffled by my door but sounding a lot like "It tastes like death."

I couldn't help but laugh at Jamie's words, pulling my body up to help them finish dinner preparations, even if it meant just carrying things from the kitchen to the formal dining room. As the golden glow from the oven began to cool when the timer ticked to zero, there was a shrill ring of the door bell.

"Fuck, he's here!" Jamie shrieked, almost dropping the hot roast dish between her oven mitts.

"Language, Jamie!" mum said, before muttering the very same curse under her breath as she looked at the sorry state our kitchen was in. "Wes, let him in. *But don't let him come into the kitchen.* "

"Sure," I said, shaking my head fondly before walking to the front door. Not hesitating to open it at all, I curled my mouth into a soft smile as Nico's form appeared before me. One hand in his pocket and the other fiddling behind his back, likely doing so instead of smoking a cigarette, Nico stood there without moving. His toes brushed the slightly raised platform at the base of my door, his eyes level with mine as I stepped forward, arms holding the door open.

"Hi," I whispered, reaching forward to wrap my arms around Nico's shoulders, kissing his mouth softly.

"Hi," Nico replied, holding me steady by my waist with his left hand, smiling into my kiss. "Are you going to invite me in?"

"Depends," I said, bumping my forehead into Nico's gently. "What do you have to offer?"

"Hmph," Nico said, brows crinkling. Wiggling his arms, Nico pulled out a dish of something that looked like tiramisu, smirking. "Is this enough?"

"For me?" I said, raising my brow.

"It's an offering for your mum and sister," Nico said, making me hum in understanding.

"Trying to impress them or something?" I asked, Nico shrugging, though he didn't deny my words. "What about me, though? You haven't made an offering to me yet."

"Why would I need to?" Nico asked, leaning forward, his feet stepping inside the threshold of my home. Now standing on a level plane, Nico towered over me, making me swallow thickly. "I've already impressed you."

Oh. This smooth motherf-

"O-Okay," I stammered, quickly pulling Nico in to shut the door. Nico laughed at my heated cheeks, pinching them fondly. "No offering, that's okay."

"I thought so," Nico said, wrapping his arms around me to hug my tightly before letting out a long sigh, nuzzling his face into my hair. The two of us hugged for a moment, before Nico pulled back, glancing around the room.

"Oh, right," I said, slapping my palm against my forehead. "This is your first inside my place, right?"

"Mhmm," Nico said, walking over to a framed picture hanging on the wall. Since dad left only a week or two ago, mum and Jamie had wasted no time removing any traces of him and replacing them with more of *us* . Mum had fished out some old cheesy professional photos of Jamie and I from when we were kids, the images a little grainy with age but nonetheless. Eyes skimming over a few pictures of Jamie, Nico's eyes found a photo of me, immediately lighting up as he grinned. "Shit, you were a chubby kid, babe."

" *Thanks , "* I said bitterly, shoving Nico with my shoulder, the boy chuckling.

"Chubby but cute," Nico amended, making me shove him again, which only made him grin wider, eventually hugging me from behind to stop my from nudging him with my shoulder. Leaning his head on my shoulder, mouth close to my ear, Nico spoke quietly. "Yep, still really damn cute." As I struggled to articulate my thoughts, which were also a jumbled mess, a voice called out from behind us, Nico's body stiffening immediately.

"Nico?" Jamie called, her form peering from around the corner. Her messy clothes that had been caked in meat juices and other darkly pigmented sauces had been cast away, and she was now clad in a casual pair of jeans and a loose-fitting knitted jumper. She was smiling tentatively at us, eyes flickering from Nico's arms around me to my beet-red face. Nico, sensing her wandering gaze as well, dropped his arms, making me look up at him in surprise. Though his body was rigid, his face was a picture of calm. If I was looking at him from afar, much like I had used to a long, long time ago, I would have thought that he would be calm, bordering on being *bored.*

But now, with his arm brushing mine stiffly and one of his hands stuffed tightly in his pocket, I knew that he was nervous, even if only a little bit. *That* feeling bubbled up inside me, and I carefully slipped my hand into his, giving it a squeeze. Jamie, seeing my action, didn't quite seem to know what expression she should wear on her face, her features morphing from surprised to lovestruck to amusement.

"I'm Jamie," my sister said, stretching her arm out to shake Nico's free hand. "We didn't introduce ourselves last time..." Sighing loudly, Jamie sheepishly scratched at the back of her neck. "I've been meaning to apologise to you, actually. I said some things I didn't mean. Sorry."

"You meant what you said," Nico said, cracking a small smile at the memory of the bowling alley. "But you weren't wrong. It's fine."

"Oh," Jamie said, brown eyes widening slightly, clearly surprised by Nico's words. She recovered from her shock quickly, giving Nico another smile, before giving me a warm look.

'Yeah, I see why you like him,' her eyes seemed to say, making me nod a little, squeezing Nico's hand again.

"Anyway, mum said dinner is ready, if you guys wanna head in," Jamie said, stepping to the side to allow us to walk past. "Um, just warning you though, Nico..."

Nico seemed to stiffen a little at Jamie's words, his hands growing a little colder.

"Please don't expect too much from our cooking," Jamie concluded, giving him a sorry glance as Nico relaxed like putty in my grasp. "Wes told us about your skills in the kitchen, and I don't think we can really compare..."

" *Jamie* ," I hissed, giving her a look as my ears heated, Nico giving me a look.

"Skills in the kitchen?" Nico echoed, his usual tinge of smugness seeping into his tone again.

"Ohhh yeah," Jamie said, snorting as she elbowed my in the ribs. "Not just your cooking though. He can't stop talking about you in general."

" *Jamie* , for fuck's sake, I swear I'm gonna-" I groaned, my sister sidestepping from my attacking hands just as we walked into the kitchen.

"Oh! You're here," mum chirped as we entered, her hands fiddling with the bowl of salad on the table. Looking up from the utensils in her hand, her eyes immediately found Nico. I saw orbs of brown trailing from the bottom of his feet to his torso, then to his arms that were linked with mine. I saw them traverse the expanse of inked skin snaking up his limbs, and then falling onto his face, taking in the dark hair and the lip ring. Her head tilted to the side a little, her face passive, not giving anything away. Before she could say anything, I stepped a little closer to Nico, hugging his arm to me. Whether I did it to assure Nico, or to show mum exactly what was going on, I didn't know. But what I did know is that the moment I did that, mum's eyes lit up and a smile growing on her features, her small body stepping around to give Nico a light hug.

Relieved, I gave Nico's hand one last squeeze before letting him go, allowing him to awkwardly hug my mum's much smaller form back.

"You must be Nico," mum said when she pulled back, expression gentle. "I'm Leanne, Wes's mum. Obviously. I've heard... a lot about you, from Wes."

" *Mum!"* I whined, making her, Jamie and Nico burst out laughing. Soon, however, among that laughter of three of the most important people in my life, I too began laughing as the weight on my shoulders slipped away into nothing.

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"Damn, you were right, Wes," Jamie said, slumping back in her chair as if her overly-filled stomach was pushing her down like lead. "That tiramisu was... *wow.* "

"Glad you liked it," Nico said, eyes bright. "I wasn't sure what kind of desserts you guys liked, but I guess I guessed right."

"You can make other desserts?" Jamie piped in, sitting up again as if she had suddenly grown a third (or fourth) stomach. Nico nodded at her words, Jamie turning to me, a serious expression on her face. "Wes, if you break up with him I'm going to be so angry."

"Don't jinx me!" I said through a bite of Nico's tiramisu, kicking Jamie under the table. Nico snorted in response, leaning forwards slightly.

"It's okay, Jamie. I wouldn't let him break up with me," he said, making me choke on my dessert.

"You-" I stammered, Nico shutting me up by spooning another mouthful of tiramisu into my open mouth, wiggling his brow.

"You really are a good cook though, Nico," mum said after swallowing her last morsel, her bowl basically licked clean.

"Tiramisu is barely cooking," Nico said, shaking his head modestly.
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"Well, if you don't consider this cooking then I dread to think about what you thought about our 'cooking'..." mum said sheepishly. "You even ended up coming in to rescue our roast..."

"Like I said," Jamie said, looking at me defiantly. "Please don't break up with him, Wes."

"I said don't jinx me!" I cried out again, mum and Jamie laughing as Nico just shook his head, resting his hand on my thigh softly.

"Oh, I've been meaning to ask," mum said, clapping her hands together at the thought. "Are you staying the night, Nico?"

If Nico's words from a second ago made me choke on my tiramisu, mum's sentence made me throw it back up again.

" *What?* " I spluttered, giving mum an incredulous look, which she returned calmly, as if my outburst was completely unwarranted.

"I asked if Nico was staying the night? I assumed he might, so I bought a toothbrush for him just in case." Mum spoke casually, like she was reading out a grocery list and not inviting my boyfriend to spend the night. From not even wanting to think about me having a boyfriend only a week ago, mum was suddenly buying him pieces of domesticity and asking him to *spend the night* ?

Sure, I had slept at Nico's more times than I can count over the last few months, but this was the first time Nico was sleeping in *my* bed.

My. Bed.

"I don't want to intrude..." Nico started, though the way his hand tightened around my thigh made my clear that he was *very* into the idea of staying the night.

"Oh, you wouldn't be intruding at all! You opened your home to Wes when he was going through a... hard time, letting you stay over is honestly the least we can do," mum assured him, Nico turning to me, eyes expectant.

"He... You... You don't have pyjamas though," I said, Jamie muttering something like " *who the hell cock blocks themselves?* " before excusing herself from the table.

"Oh, I'm sure you two can work something out," mum said, waving her hands like I was spouting complete nonsense, which to be fair, I *was.* Nico sleeps naked half the time, and only wears pants - or underwear, at least - because I asked him too.

"Well, if you're alright with it, then I'd be happy to stay the night," Nico said, smiling at my mum graciously before giving me a very different one.

"Good! Don't you boys worry about the dishes, go ahead and relax," mum said, beginning to gather the dishes up as Nico and I stood, Nico's body relaxed as he had quickly grown accustomed to my household, his initial tension ebbing away without a trace. I, however, seemed to be on high alert.

'Oh God, when was the last time I changed my sheets,' I thought to myself, brain aching as I tried to remember. *'It has to have been recently... right? Oh God.'*

"You okay, babe?" Nico asked, amused expression on his face as I jumped at his words, nodding my head adamantly.

"Yep! Fine! Totally, *totally* fine," I said, chuckling shakily.

'I did clean my room a bit, but what if he finds something weird... No, you don't even own weird stuff, do you? Do you, Wes?'

"Babe, you look like you're about to explode," Nico snickered, pulling me into his side after we climbed the stairs. Leaning down, Nico spoke again, "It's not like this is the first time we've slept together."

"We're not 'sleeping together' in my house!" I said loudly. As my words echoed down the hall, I heard something drop in Jamie's bedroom. Blushing, I grabbed Nico's wrist, pulling him into my room and shutting the door.

"We're not?" Nico asked, cocking his head to the side. "Guess I'll sleep on the floor then..."

"No, we're sleeping together. In the bed. But we're not... ' *sleeping'* sleeping together," I said, my own nonsensical words making me frustrated. "Don't even say it, Nico. You know what I mean."

"So it's okay for us to ' *sleep'* together in my house, but not yours?" Nico asked, drawing out the word 'sleep' with his tongue.

"My sister is next door! And my mum is down the hall," I said, jerking my arm towards the shared wall between my room and Jamie's. "At yours, Bell is away half the time, and... and her room isn't next door."

"Well, Jamie wished me luck and hoped that I would, I quote, ' *get some* ', so I honestly don't think she'd mind," Nico said, smirking as I visibly paled.

"Oh my God I hate her," I said, covering my face with my hands, collapsing onto the edge of my bed.

"She's a good sister," Nico said, flopping down beside me before pulling my hands from my face. "Your mum too. She's nice."

I'll do better.

"She is," I whispered, suddenly overcome with feeling. Nico seemed to notice, dropping his teasing and flirtatious tone from before to roll onto his side, pressing a chaste kiss to my cheek.

This is better.

This is the best.

A/N: Aaaaand sorry for the wait everyone! Finally managed to get this chapter out after a good second of being away from this story. I finished my exams (badly) a few days ago, but I just needed a few days

to decompress and recover. I'm just glad they're over at this point - an exam-free life is great. I've still got some classes and other assignments to do, but the majority of my workload is done, so I can now spend some more time writing this story, which I'm sure quite a few of you are happy about :) Thank you so much for leaving such lovely comments on the last chapter, and I do apologise again for the wait. After all the emotionally draining content of the last few chapters, I needed to lighten the story back up a bit, so I hope you enjoyed it (and that it was worth the wait!).

Also, just to make it clear, there are a few more chapters after this one (I know the last chapter seemed like it was the end, but I tend to waffle on for a bit so I've still got some more story to tell). So, as always, thanks for reading, and I'll see you in the next chapter! xx

p.s. everyone who's keen for the smut I kind of baited you with in chapter 46 (and this chapter too, I guess), you'll have to wait a liiiittttle bit longer for it. It's coming up, just not in the next chapter. Or two. Patience is a virtue, my friends~

FORTY-NINE

"The only bad thing about getting expelled is that I can't walk into school with you," Nico said bitterly, face twisted into a grimace as he parked on the curb outside the school gate. Students were staring at the two of us without shame, people seeming to slow their steps as they walked past us. Nico, not usually one to care about people staring, glared at those whose gazes lingered a little too long through the car windows.

Managing a small smile at the blatant distaste written all over Nico's face, I grabbed his hand and pressed a hard kiss to his knuckles, more of a good luck charm for me than for him. Nico stopped looking at the students looking at us to drop his eyes to our linked hands, sighing.

"Wes, are you *sure* you'll be okay?" Nico asked, making me roll my eyes.

"Nico, I'll be fine," I said, forcing my voice to stay level. "I think."

"You *think* ?" Nico repeated, frowning.

"No, no, I know," I said hurriedly, shaking my head. "Benny said that Daniel's still recovering from, you know, the fight and everything, so he's not back at school yet. And after all of that, the teachers are apparently patrolling the school like we're a prison or something, so it should be fine." Nico raised a brow, and I quickly hurried to correct my words. "No, I'm *sure* it'll be fine."

"I still don't like it," Nico mumbled, his eyes shooting death glares through the window again as some more students walked past, ballsy enough to actually point at the two of us.

"What happened to being proud of me for wanting to go back to school," I said, curling my mouth up teasingly. "Where did my supportive boyfriend go?"

"He didn't go anywhere," Nico said, eyes turning into small crescents as he smiled, kissing the side of my mouth carefully. "He's just supportive *and worried.* "

"Hey," I said, clasping my hands around Nico's face, fingers tickling his cheeks. "I'll be *fine* . I'm just going to class, I'll keep my head down. Benny will keep me company anyway."

"Okay, as much as I trust Benny, I'm not sure how good he'll be at protecting you, babe," Nico said, eyes gleaming with mirth.

"Yeah, he'd probably be the first to go down, to be honest," I said, Nico snorting as he leaned in to kiss me again.

Knock, knock, knock.

"Speak of the devil, your questionable bodyguard is here," Nico said, glancing behind me as I pouted, turning to look at the person interrupting us. Benny stood there, fingers poised in the air as he wiggled his brow at the two of us.

"I swear he always waits for the worst time to show up," I huffed, Nico laughing, giving me a kiss before handing me my backpack from the backseat.

"Wes, if anything happens, call me straight away, okay?" Nico said, running his fingers through my hair once as I nodded, stepping out of the car. Slinging his arm over my shoulder, Benny bent down to give Nico a quick greeting, making a grand promise about protecting me. Nico and I gave each other a look, smiles reflecting off each other, before we parted. As I walked into school, trying to ignore the curious glances of other students, I noticed Nico's car lingering at the gate, only peeling off the sidewalk when I disappeared into the building.

The moment Benny and I stepped into the hallway, the energetic post-weekend buzz quietened for a brief second, all eyes on us. It didn't take long for people to begin whispering again, voice soft but loud when united.

"Hey, that's Nico's boyfriend, isn't it. So he's back from his suspension?" a voice spoke from the side, my ears pricking up at the sound.

"Boyfriend? Are they actually dating?" her friend asked back, voice a little louder.

"Didn't you see them at the fight? They were basically clinging to each other. And Nico beat the shit out of Daniel because of him."

"Oh yeah, they're definitely *dating. I saw them outside the gate, Nico drove him to school again, and Nico doesn't drive people to school."*

"He's been driving that guy to school for a while now. Do you think they've been dating since then?"

"Probably? No one even thought that they were, though. I mean, who would've thought that Nico's into dudes."

"You know what, I'm not even shocked about that. I just don't get why he's with that *guy, you know? Like... he's not that good looking... But..."* I flinched at the girl's words, Benny rolling his eyes and muttering something under his breath, his words drowned out by the chorus of gossip trickling through the air.

"Hey, ignore them," Benny said, pushing my back to propel me through the crowd until we reached our lockers. "They're probably just jealous that you managed to pull Nico even though you have a dick."

" *Benny!* " I hissed, shoving him a little as he chortled.

"I'm just being honest, damn!" Benny said, rubbing the spot I shoved as he grinned shamelessly. Benny's grin faltered as he saw something - or someone - behind me, and instinctively I turned to follow his gaze. My eyes met large brown ones simmering with anger, and I froze in my spot.

Sofia.

The girl of my nightmares walked down the hall with a purpose, Parker flanking her side. A few people began noticing their approach, the whispers

pulling in like the tide.

"Hey, that's his ex or something, right? The one he cheated on?"

"Supposedly cheated on. I mean, he's apparently been dating Nico for weeks now and that girl only said that he cheated on her like, what, a week ago or something? If anything, that guy cheated on Nico with *her."*

"Well, he's clearly still with Nico, and I doubt they'd still be together if he did cheat on him."

"Totally. Plus, that girl's whole story seemed fishy anyway. Didn't I tell you that he didn't seem like a guy who could cheat?"

Sofia, hearing the words bouncing off the walls of the hallway, gritted her teeth and clenched her fists, her feet picking up their pace as she stormed towards Benny and I.

"Dude, should we run?" Benny asked, fumbling with his lock as he began to make a strategic exit.

Run? The thought was tempting, more than tempting. My heart pounded in my chest, and my muscles were tense and screaming at me to *move, move, move.* If it was a month ago, or even a week ago, I would have listened to my muscles and fled down the hall a long, long time ago. I was used to running away from everything; from my feelings for Nico, my sexuality, my own family.

And honestly, I was tired of running.

Benny, noticing that I wasn't moving, stopped his motions and looked at me tentatively. Steeling my face and clutching my books tight to my chest, I let out a tight breath.

"I've got to deal with her sometime," I said quietly, giving Benny a sideways glance. "Might as well be now."

"Damn," Benny said, squinting his eyes as if he was struggling to see. "Where did my best friend Wes go? He's usually a fucking chicken."

"Fuck off," I said, managing a smile, Benny's words loosening some of the tension in my shoulders.

"You tell that to Sofia, man," Benny said, slapping my back supportively. "I got your back, and- Oh *shit* , they're here."

Turning my head stiffly from Benny, I winced a little as Sofia sauntered up to us, face livid.

"Sofia," I said, voice taut.

Not wasting any time for greetings, not that I expected her to, Sofia's lips parted in a snarl.

"Is that all you have to say to me, Wes?" Sofia spat, brown eyes narrowed to slits. "After what you did to me?"

"Did to you?" I repeated, voice still. "Sofia, I told you before. I know I led you on, and hurt you, and I'm really, really sorry about that. I truly am. I know I fucked up, and I wish I handled everything better, but I really didn't mean to hurt you like that. I was struggling with my sexuality, my family and with Nic-"

"Don't even say that bastard's name," Sofia said, her voice like a metal string pulled tight, just one breath away from snapping. *That bastard.* Her slur rang sharp, the metal string plucking at my heart and temper, off tune and grating to my ears.

"Sofia," I gritted out, voice rough, "you can say whatever shit you want about me, call me a bastard, an asshole, I don't care. Hell, maybe I even deserve it. But don't you *dare* talk shit about my boyfriend." My words were razor sharp, and Sofia shaking with every word, as if they physically slapped her in the face.

" *Boyfriend* ?" Sofia yelled, her words bouncing off the walls. I had noticed before that students in the corridor were glancing at us curiously, but when they heard Sofia's loud, angered voice shake the halls, they not only glanced at us but began to stop and watch instead.

"Yes, boyfriend," I said casually, running my fingers through my hair in a bid to hide my shaking hands. Sweat began to build on my brow, my head hot but the rest of my body cold. At my words, Sofia laughed, her mouth turning upwards in a terrifying grin.

"Boyfriend." Punctuated by a short laugh, Sofia shook her head slowly. "No one here honestly believes that he could be your boyfriend. I mean, let's be honest, Nico Beckett is a man whore who sleeps with anything that moves!" Sofia's eyes were wide and rimmed with red, her face flushed. The girl laughed again, almost delirious, pointing a finger at me sharply. "You know what, though. He's a whore, and you're a cheater. Maybe you're actually meant for each other!"

"Shut the fuck up, Sofia! You don't know the first thing about Nico," I growled, nails digging into the palm of my hand.

"Hey!" Parker piped up, stepping forward, his fingers digging into the fleshy part of my shoulder harshly. The force dug into my muscles there, making me wince and stagger back into Benny, who caught me with a scowl on his face.

"What the hell, Parker?" Benny seethed, stepping to the side angrily, his usually jovially sloped eyes hard.

"Wes needs to watch what he says," Parker said, eyes looking me up and down with disgust.

" *I* need to watch what I say?" I asked, laughing coldly. "I'm not the one who spread lies around the whole school. So out of all of us here, Parker, who really needs to watch what they say?"

" *Lies* ?" Sofia's voice was high-pitched and painful, her teeth churned out her words.

"Yes, lies," I said, throwing my hands up in the air. "Sofia, you told everyone that, what, we were *dating* ? And that I *cheated* on you? How the fuck do I cheat on someone I never dated!"

"You're lying!" Sofia cried out, stepping forward to push against my chest again, hitting the same spot Parker had dug his fingers into a second ago, which was sure to bruise. "W-We've kissed, and... and been on dates..."

"When have we been on a date?!" I spluttered, Sofia's eyes bulging.

"We have! We- We went to Nicoletta's together, just the two of us," Sofia said, voice quietening, if only slightly.

"Sofia, that... that was just us having dinner as friends. You invited all the others to come, remember?"

"But they *didn't* come!" Sofia said, as if it was obvious. "We had dinner, just the two of us, so how is that not a date?!"

"I didn't have the intention of it being a date! I was just eating with a friend!" I said, Sofia's eyes beginning to prick with tears, blurring some of the redness.

"Th-Then... Then what about when we kissed!" Sofia looked at me, rubbing her eyes roughly. "We kissed, so that means we..."

"In what world do we live in that kissing someone means we're dating?!" I blurted out, my face bright red, a colourful mixture of embarrassment and anger. If kissing someone went hand in hand with dating, then what the fuck would Nico and I have been all those months ago. I mean, we had sex that fateful night at the beginning of the year, so in Sofia's crazy world we should have been married the day after!

"Sofia, you honestly need to calm the fuck down and think things through rationally," I said, Benny nodding by my side, his jaw almost slack at the sheer absurdity of Sofia's words.

"Wes, you... You..." Sofia stammered, her anger choking her. "You don't get to talk to me like that! You lied to me, and messed with my feelings. No, you can't say that to me when you were going around behind my back sleeping with that son of a bitch! You know what, when I saw the two of

you at Nicoletta's, I could finally see you for what you were. And now, everyone else knows as well!"

"So it *was* you!" Benny gasped, pointing out his finger accusingly. "We... We didn't know for sure that it was you... But now..."

"You sent that picture around the school?" I asked, voice quiet, simmering. Looking at Sofia in the eye, taking a step towards her until I towered over her meagre height, I asked the question again. "Was it you?"

"S-So?" Sofia squeaked, taking a shaky step backwards, eyes wide. "E-Everyone had to know. Everyone had to see that you're... That you're a liar, and-"

"You *outed* me," I said slowly, eyes boring into Sofia's, so sharply that she couldn't help but look away. Her eyes skittered off to the side, but widened when they met someone else's in the crowd. Pupils shifting again, Sofia's vision bounced around the hallway, and her breathing seemed to stop as wherever she looked, eyes seemed to be on hers. Seeing her.

"You outed me to the entire school. That wasn't your right. That was *no one's* right." I spoke, voice quiet. Though my voice was soft, my words shook with something deafening, seemingly loud in the pin-drop quietness of the hallway. "You say that I lied to you, and messed with you, but at least I didn't act like you."

My words took all of the breath out of me, making me inhale loudly.

When I exhaled, it seemed like everyone in the hallway did so as well. Everyone's held breaths left them all at once, and with that, so did Sofia. A bundle of brown hair and red-streaked eyes darted down the hall, everyone staring after her with heated gazes. Parker was soon gone, but not before giving Benny and I hard glances, chasing after his closest friend like the loyal guard dog that he was.

As they turned the corner, the school bell rang, the noice cutting through the tension with a shrill cry. The crowd seemed to move out of its standstill immediately, students swathed in school colours moving in ripples. People

stared as they walked past us, mouth parted with gossip on their lips, but at this point I didn't care. It was as if a weight had lifted off my shoulders, everything I had swallowed back in front of Sofia having been cast away. Whatever people thought of me now, it didn't matter. It never mattered, because the people who mattered saw me clearly. Crystal clear.

"Well, *damn* ," Benny breathed, giving me a wide-eyed look.

"Hm?" I asked, voice trembling a little as I turned to my best friend, who cracked a small smile, eyes alight.

"Who the hell are you and what did you do to my best friend?" Benny said, pulling out a short laugh from me, my shoulder bumping into his.

"Shut up, Benny."

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The pool shed wasn't the same without Nico. Without Nico, the shed wasn't as warm, and time didn't pass as quickly. Sure, Benny was here so it wasn't just me and my silence, but it just wasn't the same.

"Wes, I swear if you don't get that annoyed expression off your face I'm going to fork you," Benny said, waving his saliva-covered fork in front of my face. Grimacing, I slapped his wrist away, Benny huffing and stabbing his boiled broccoli instead.

"I'm not annoyed," I said, Benny rolling his eyes.

"Oh, really? Well you look pretty annoyed to me. I'm a little pissed that you don't appreciate my company as much as Nico's. What happened to bros before hoes, Wes? You fucking traitor."

"Okay, I take it back. I'm annoyed now," I said, struggling to keep a straight face as Benny emphatically gasped, hand moving to cover his mouth.

"I'm *hurt* , Wes! I'm your only friend here, and you treat me like shit. *You don't get to talk to me like that!* "
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My head snapped up from my food to look at Benny with a raised brow, a teasing grin on his face as he copied Sofia's words from this morning. Instead of malice, Benny injected the words with mild mocking, the words even more ridiculous than they had been the first time.

"I still can't wrap my head around it," I said, groaning, Benny nodding in agreement as he shoved some more food into his mouth, chewing loudly. Opening his mouth to say something mid-chew, his words were cut off when the door to the shed opened suddenly, our heads both turning towards the movement with alarm.

My first thought was that Sofia and Parker had come back for round two, or that Alyssa and her posse had decided that last week wasn't enough. My heart settled only slightly when neither of these thoughts came to fruition, Rachel's meek face peering around the gap in the open door, followed by Leo's. Benny immediately stood, eyes hard as he stepped between me and them, pointing his fork ahead of him again as if it were a sword. Seeing him waving his plastic fork around made me roll my eyes, cheeks heating with embarrassment as my heart swelled.

"Benny, put the fork down, Jesus Christ," I said, kicking the back of his calf with my foot.

"Hey Wes, Benny," Leo said, opening the door a little wider. Leo rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly as Rachel nervously pushed her glasses up higher onto her nose bridge, the sheen of sweat there making them slip down.

"Hey...?" I responded, questioning.

"Um... can we, maybe, talk to you?" Rachel said, mousy voice a little weak.

"Depends on what you have to say," Benny said, narrowing his eyes a little, Rachel jumping. The girl quickly moved to shake her hands in front of her, her head following her actions. Glasses sliding down again, Rachel laughed nervously, Leo giving her an exasperated look.

"It's nothing bad, I swear!" Rachel said, returning Leo's stare with a pleading one, the boy sighing heavily.

"We're sorry," Leo said, looking at me firmly. "You know, for... not being there for you, when all of that stuff was happening. With Daniel and Alyssa... and Sofia. We're... We're sorry."

"Really, *really* sorry," Rachel chimed in, hands now fiddling with the fabric of her skirt.

"Oh," I said, voice scratchy as awkwardness filled the little room. Seeing me look apprehensive, Leo sighed again, rubbing the space between his eyes before speaking, as if he were trying to clear his thoughts.

"We only heard about things from Sofia's point of view, and, well, you probably know that it wasn't exactly favourable for your end," Leo said, rolling his eyes a little. "I mean, she told us you guys were dating and that you cheated on her, so we were surprised. I mean, we knew that you weren't that type of guy, but Sofia's our friend, and we trusted her. But then the whole thing with you being... gay, and with Nico and everything, we began to wonder if Sofia's story was true. When everything was revealed, we kind of realised that things didn't really match up, and if you guys had been dating we would have known, right?"

"A-And, what she did to you, with the photo... that was really not cool," Rachel said, nose crinkling with distaste. "Way beyond not cool. We've been friends with Sofia since last year, but we didn't know she could do that to someone. To a friend. At least, Leo and I hope that we could still be friends?"

"We know we kind of fucked up, but we really-"

"Sure," I said, Rachel and Leo's eyes widening. Benny laughed at their reaction, sitting back down from his standing position to continuing eating like nothing had even happened.

"That's it?" Leo asked, head tilting to the side. "You're... okay with that? With us?"

"Yeah, why wouldn't I be?" I asked, smiling a little. "You apologised, so it's all good. And I don't know if you realised, but we're all kind of fuck ups here."

"Woah, Wes, speak for yourself," Benny said, an affronted expression on his face.

"Are you kidding me? You're the biggest fuck up here!" I said, Benny lunging forward with his fork, a stalk of broccoli flying towards me.

" *You don't get to talk to me like that!* " Benny yelled shrilly, his expression wild. Unable to maintain a straight face, the two of us burst into laughter, Leo and Rachel look at the two of us like we were insane. But, the wide smiles on their faces and chuckles dancing on their tongues told us that even if we were insane, even if we were all fuck ups, that was okay.

Yeah, things would be okay.

A/N: I managed to get this out before the end of the week, so good job me (yes, this is self-praise hour)! It was actually quite satisfying to write this chapter, because I finally got to give Wes some balls after 48 chapters of him being a major chicken (according to Benny). As always, thanks for reading my story and for all the lovely comments you guys have left, and I'll see you in the next chapter! We're only a handful of chapters away from the end now!

FIFTY

A/N: What you've all been waiting for - there's some smutty smut smut in this chapter~

"Oh my god that's so cute!" Rachel gushed, tears in her eyes as Leo and Benny looked at her, cringing. Me, on the other hand, tried to look anywhere but at the girl who was basically drooling over my censored story about how Nico and I met and how our relationship progressed. "This is so much better than the books I read. Seriously, the girls in my book club would die if I told them about how cute you guys are!"

"I'm sorry, *what* ?" Benny asked, giving Rachel an odd look.

"My book club!" Rachel repeated slowly, as if we were deaf. When we kept looking at her blankly, she let out a huff, pushing her glasses up before looking at me, cheeks rosy and eyes glittering. "We all, um, support your relationship. We find it really cute! Especially Ingrid, do you know Ingrid?" Rachel glanced at all of us, basically rocking back and forth with excitement. The three of us shook our heads, Rachel waving away our confusion.

"Well, she write gay stories online, you know? She would probably pass out if she actually knew how adorable you and Nico are. I mean, Nico *cooking* for you? And... And the whole 'project-partners-to-lovers' trope? Oh my God I'm about to cry!" Rachel couldn't seem to contain herself anymore, a terrifying squeal erupting from her body as she leapt over, hugging me tightly. "I'm so happy for you, Wes!"

"Uh, I think you started crying a while ago, Rachel," Leo said, rolling his eyes.

"Um, thanks, Rachel? I think?" I said, giving Benny a questioning look, my friend just shrugging uselessly. "I didn't realise that, um, people were supportive of my relationship, though. After what happened last week..."

The moment I brought up what happened last week, the easy-going mood had been sufficiently dampened, Rachel pulling back from our hug with a sad look.

"That's something else I'm sorry about..." Rachel said, sniffling a bit. "You know, lots of my friends thought you guys were really cute, but we were too scared to say something in front of Daniel and Alyssa and all of them..."

"Ugh, same over here," Leo said, before shaking his head. "Well, almost the same. Most of guys on my footy team also support you, just minus the, you know, gay fan fiction or whatever. They don't have a problem with you guys being gay, it's just that they're friends with Daniel, so they found it hard to speak out against him... It's a shitty excuse though, I know."

"No, it's... I understand," I said, smiling glumly. *I understand all too well* . It's hard to say things when you know people might get hurt, or disagree with you. Not all people like confrontation, in fact, most people try to avoid it at all costs. Sometimes that's good, since it keeps the peace, but at other times... Other times it's wrong. Cowardly. Unjust. All of these things.

But it's hard. Bloody hell, is it hard.

" *Oooookay,* now everyone looks fucking sad, so I'm sad. Let's talk about happy things, yeah?" Benny said, clapping his hands together as if the sharp noise would slap the glum expressions off our faces. Rachel smiled a little, Leo shaking his head as he chuckled. Used to Benny's behaviour, I just rolled my eyes, leaning back on my small throne of kickboards.

"So, happy thoughts," Leo said, scratching his head as he tried to think of something 'happy' to talk about. Seeming to draw a blank, he nudged Rachel with his knee, the girl's brow furrowing before smoothing out with newfound excitement.

"Formal!" Rachel exclaimed, looking at Benny and I expectantly. "Are you guys going?"

"Oh God, I completely forgot about it," I said, eyes wide.

"Well *I* didn't!" Benny groaned, head hanging low. "While you've been busy canoodling with Nico, I've been trying to find a date!"

Pretending my flushed cheeks were a normal temperature, I raised a brow towards Benny.

"And... did you find one...?"

Giving me a flat look, Benny gestured towards his face, scowling a little.

"Do you think I would look *this* depressed if I found one?"

"Take Jamie," I snickered, Benny's face growing blank for a moment as he genuinely considered the idea, before shaking his head emphatically and mimicked gagging.

"Um, yeah, no thanks, bro," Benny said, shivering. "Ugh, definitely not, thank you. We're supposed to be talking about happy things, not things that make me wanna hurl up my broccoli."

"I probably won't go," I said softly, making everyone turn to me. Chuckling a little at their stares, I shrugged. "I mean, Nico can't even go because he was expelled, so there's really no point..."

"Dude," Benny said, eyes almost watering. "You're ditching me. For Nico. *Again?!* Where's the loyalty?! The solidarity?! The fucking *bro code.* "

Rachel and Leo snorted at Benny's antics while I cringed. Benny, as always, slid closer to me and tried to wrap me up in his arms pleadingly, my own arms batting away at his face which was scrunched up desperately.

"You're not really selling the idea of going, Benny," I said, grimacing.

"But if you're not going then I can't go!"

"Then don't go!" I said, Benny deflating onto the floor. It took him all of three seconds to recover again, bouncing up onto his knees, face alight.

"Then what about the after party! We can at least go to the after party! It's not organised by the school so Nico could go as well. Come on, Wes. Live a bit! We're going to be under house arrest for exams, this is the last chance we get to have fun," Benny said, nodding at his own idea with enthusiasm. His face, so excited and eager, made me waver a little, eyes softening.

"Do you really want to go...?" I asked, voice tired. Benny nodded again, decision firm. Sighing, I shrugged again, crossing my arms over my chest in resignation before muttering a quiet "fine, I'll go." Benny, Rachel and Leo let out a harmony of cheers, Benny finally managing to pin me in a vice-like hug, his blonde hair tickling my nose. I couldn't help but hide a smile as my friends laughed around me, the air light and our spirits carefree.

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"You two don't *understand* ," Benny whined from where he was planted on the floor by the foot of my bed. Nico sat serenely with his back against the headboard, one hand scrolling through his phone and the other resting itself across my midsection, warm and heavy. My body hunched itself snugly into Nico's chest as I sat between his legs, my own hands keeping themselves busy by softly running up and down the length of Nico's arms absent-mindedly. Every now and then, Nico would lean his head down to rest against my hair, kissing the crown of my head with a smile on his lips.

Benny, turning to see yet another moment where Nico's head was buried in my hair and my face smiling drunkenly into the ceiling, threw his hands up in frustration.

"Guys, focus! I need help!"

"You look fine, Benny," Nico said, turning away from his phone with an amused grin. "The shirt and jeans you've got on is enough."

"Nico, just because you can wear a plain shirt and jeans to a party and make Wes's panties drop doesn't mean I can!" Benny huffed, giving the two of us a pointed look. Nico couldn't help but snort while I blinked at my best friend incredulously before trying to burrow my heated face into Nico's arm.
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"Are you trying to make Wes's panties drop, Benny?" Nico asked, the stern look on his face betrayed by the way his shoulders shook with suppressed laughter.

"Ha-ha," Benny said flatly, tugging at the clothes draped over his lanky body. "Very funny. But *seriously* , I need some help to not look, you know, *lame* ."

"Uh, sorry to break the news to you, Benny, but you can't really hide your lame. There's just way too much," I said, Benny flipping me off as Nico snorted, arm hugging me tighter as he rested his head in the crook of my neck, muffling his laughter there.

"You guys are the worst," Benny groaned, turning back to the mirror and doing a little twirl, before slapping his cheeks. "Okay, whatever. Let's just go. This is as good as it's gonna get." Turning to Nico and I, Benny gave us a long, impatient look as the two of us didn't move, my body not wanting to leave Nico's comfortable embrace and Nico basically moulded to my bed sheets by this point.

Seeing that we weren't making any moves to leave the bed, Benny grabbed one of the many discarded shirts he had brought over to my house and scrunched it up into a ball, throwing it at my face. Before it could hit my face, Nico's arms caught the projectile clothing, throwing it to the side with ease. Benny, face now more red than mine, looked like he was about to burst, jumping onto the bed with a cry before relentlessly kicking Nico and I until we were both on the floor, unable to control our laughter.

"Fine, fine!" Nico said, standing up while brushing his pants. Stretching out a hand towards me to pull me up to my feet, Nico's eyes crinkled a little as he smiled. Hauling me up, the three of us made our way outside to pile into Nico's car. The after party was being held at another student's house, his parent's lucrative business meaning that they were always working, leaving their excessively large house in the hands of their privileged and exceedingly spoiled teenage son. The sound of the party could be heard when we turned the corner. Since everyone else who came had come from the formal, there were already intoxicated people stumbling along the

footpath outside the house, giggling and yelling as they leaned against each other in a bid to stay upright.

After parking the car, the three of us walked up the slight inclination towards the house, the music growing louder and the multicoloured lights flashing through the large windows lining the exterior.

"Where are the drinks?" Benny asked, eyes squinting as he tried to peer over the wall of students for the alcohol. "We need drinks."

"I'm not drinking," I said, Nico snickering, eyes gleaming as he looked me in the eye, clearly thinking about the last time I got wasted and ended up in his bed.

"Ugh, what a party pooper," Benny said, but didn't push further, turning to Nico. "What about you?"

"I drove us here," Nico said, looking at me briefly. "As much as I'd like to drink, I'd rather get us home in one piece."

"So responsible all of a sudden," I said, blinking in surprise. Nico then gave me a mischievous grin, shrugging.

"Or we can just get Colin to pick us up," Nico added, my eyes rolling. *I should have known.* Benny let out a whoop, immediately singing in a high voice "shots, shots, shots". With that, Benny raced ahead of Nico and I, his body already bouncing to the beat of the bass that pounded at the walls of the house. People ignored Benny as he brushed past them as he made a beeline towards the drinks, but when their gazes brushed past Nico and I they always lingered. Sensing people's eyes on us, though most were hazy with drink, Nico slung his arm over my shoulder, pulling me closely to his side, a small smirk on his face at he looked down at me, making me raise an eyebrow.

"What are you looking at me like that for?" I asked, Nico leaning down to murmur against my ear, his quiet voice so much louder than the music that was blaring around us. Bodies pulsed around us in time with the beat, nudging at our arms and backs so that we began to naturally sway with the

music. Though pressed up against others, when Nico pressed himself against me like *that* , it was easy to ignore the sea of sweaty, alcohol-infused bodies moving in and out like waves.

"Just thinking that I need to keep an eye on you," Nico said, arms pulling me in closer and closer.

"Why's that?" I whispered, a little breathless as Nico decided to brush his teeth across the skin of my ear.

"Well, someone here has a track record of getting drunk at parties and sleeping with hot guys," Nico said, making me choke on my breath, turning to him sharply.

"I do *not* have a track record! It was just that one time, and... and it was with you!" I said, shoving Nico's chest with enough force to make my point, but not enough to push his body away from me. Narrowing my eyes a little, I turned my body in Nico's arms until I was facing him, hands pressed against his chest. "But wait. Did you really just call yourself 'hot'?" I asked, sliding my hands up to wrap them around Nico's neck, raising myself onto my toes to level our gazes.

"What, do you not agree?" Nico asked, blue eyes flashing with a myriad of colours under the self-installed strobe lights. His mouth curled up further when I rolled my eyes, my own lips twitching as the two of us leaned forwards, noses bumping as we swayed.

"You're so fucking full of yourself," I said, Nico's chuckle making his lips tickle mine, almost teasing in the way they were there for one breath and then gone with the next.

"If not hot, then what? What kind of guys do you hook up with at parties then?" Nico asked, almost goading, head tilting to the side as if he were about to lock our lips together. Leaning forward, expecting Nico to follow, I let out a whine as he pulled back a little. Though our faces were still close enough that the tips of our noses touched, the parts that I wanted to be connected were so far away. So fucking far.

Swallowing my desire, deciding to play whatever game Nico was trying to pull, I looked up at Nico through my lashes, challenging.

"Let me think," I said slowly, dropping my gaze from Nico's eyes to his lips pointedly, my stomach flipping when Nico licked his lips in response to my motion. Looking back up at him almost made me lose my train of thought, Nico's pupils large and dark as they flickered with anticipation and want. Clearing my throat, I slowly trailed my finger up the length of Nico's neck, tugging at the ends of his hair, Nico's small shiver making me lean in again before speaking.

"I kind of have a thing for guys with dark hair and blue eyes," I said, tugging on Nico's hair as I spoke. "Guys who are a bit taller than me, that are kind of assholes, at least on the outside." Nico let out a breath at my words, nudging his nose into mine. Grinning, I made a point of breaking eye contact to peer over Nico's shoulders, nodding slowly.

"Yeah, I think I have a thing for guys like that one over there," I said while gesturing behind Nico, his arms around me freezing for a second before a growl rolled from his throat. With a curse on his mouth, Nico closed the space between us to violently crush our lips together. His tongue, slick and coiled, rolled against mine, pulling a desperate moan from my lungs.

"You're such a fucking liar," Nico in a brief moment of reprieve, my mouth swallowing his words as he forcefully kissed me again.

"Yeah, I am," I managed to push out, chest heaving and lips bruised. "But what are you going to do about it?"

Nico's eyes clouded over at my words, fingers curling into my waist.

"I'll show you *exactly* what I'll do, babe," Nico said, pushing me firmly with his hands, my body compliant to his touch. Locking lips as he steered me through the crowd, I clung to Nico tightly, almost to the point that he was carrying me down the packed hallways of the large house. People were looking - they always were - but I could hardly think about anything else with Nico taking hold of all of my senses. His smell soaked into my skin,

his fingers digging into my flesh, the taste of him on my tongue, his eyes locked onto mine. All I could feel was *Nico* .

The music followed us as we walked (more like stumbled) away from the epicentre of the party, Nico pushing open a door to an unknown location. Nico let out a 'tsk' under his breath as he looked inside, apparently finding two people already dry humping in there. I couldn't help but giggle at Nico's impatient expression, pushing him forward to let the door close behind us.

"Let's open door number two," I said, laughing again as Nico huffed out a laugh, pulling me against him as we tripped over each other's feet towards another door. We didn't even have to open it to know that people were inside - definitely more than two this time.

"Fuck, door number three?" I asked, voice strained.

"Better be fucking empty behind door number three, I can't wait any more," Nico said tensely, nibbling at my bottom lip, his lip ring pressing into my skin.

Fuck.

"Y-Yeah, open it," I said, flushing at the embarrassingly blatant neediness in my voice. Nico didn't tease nor gloat over the tone in my voice, instead hastily opening the door. The frustrated frown on his face erased itself when the room came up empty, Nico smirking. Seeing Nico's elated expression, I let out a laugh that was soon silenced by Nico's mouth on mine again, his arms pushing me forwards before locking the door behind him.

Nico kept pushing me back until my thighs met a hard surface - a desk, I noted - my hands bracing my against it as Nico's hips pressed into mine. Nico's pelvis rubbing against mine, I could feel myself hardening, gasping when Nico detached his lips from mine to plant them on my neck, sucking and biting. My hands cradled his head, fingers running through his hair and scraping at his scalp, before trekking down his back. Nico's hips jerked into mine, and I could feel that he was hard too.

"Fuck, Nico," I breathed, head tilting backwards, Nico's mouth kissing down my neck, my throat, to my collar bone. I was sure that I would be covered in red bruises in the morning, and the thought made my dick throb. I knew that I was dripping, I knew that if Nico just slipped his hand into my pants he'd feel my wetness just dripping through my briefs. And then he's just have to grip me and-

"Babe, fuck," Nico groaned, his mouth leaving my skin with a pop to press against my mouth messily. "You're grinding into me like- *God* , you have no idea what you're doing to me."

"Nico, stop talking and touch me, *please* ," I pleaded, too far gone to even be embarrassed about my desperation, rubbing my clothed erection against Nico's again, the both of us groaning at the friction.

" *Fuck* , okay, yeah, okay," Nico said, a noise escaping him that was somewhere between a laugh and a curse, his tongue flickering over his swollen lips. His fingers, nimble and on a mission, wasted no time in unbuttoning my jeans and pulling them down over my ass alongside my underwear. I gasped in surprise when Nico's hands grabbed onto my ass, hoisting me up so I was sitting on the edge of the desk. Legs spread wide to fit Nico between them, I shakily fumbled with Nico's own pants, wanting nothing more than to get them off, off, *off.*

I let out a breath of relief when Nico's pants finally listened to my touch, Nico kicking them off with finesse. My fingers hovered in the air before pressing themselves flush against the notches on Nico's abdomen, dipping in and out of his taut muscles as I trailed them down provocatively. Nico's breath hitched when my fingers tickled further down, before closing around the base of his cock, squeezing tightly. Nico let out a guttural sound as my hand slid down the length of his penis, the rough pad of my thumb passing over the slit at his head. Nico's ooze coated my thumb, my hand sliding back up his length, wetness following.

I would have laughed a little at the way Nico was barely able to contain himself if he hadn't put his hand on my dick at that time, mirroring my motions with vigour. I moaned into Nico's mouth, my boyfriend taking to opportunity to slip his tongue in, exploring and coaxing. Our hands on each

other's dicks pumped in synchronisation, both of our hands slick with pre-cum.

Dropping the hand that he was using to keep my head in place as he kissed me, I swore under my breath as Nico hand cupped my balls, kneading. Nico drove his palm over the expanse of my dick as he did so, sending ripples of pleasure coursing through the entirety of my body, toes curling in the air. My mind was spotty, unable to think about anything but the feeling of Nico's hands and lips on me, unable to form sentences as I dug my fingers into Nico's shoulder, a whimper forming on my lips.

"N-Nico I'm gonna-"

"Yeah, babe, come for me," Nico breathed, hand pumping harder and faster, so much so that I could barely think clearly enough to keep pumping *him* .

"Nico, fuck!" I cried out, the sound getting lost as Nico swallowed it up, my body trembling as I came by Nico's hand. Hot seed sprayed across my stomach and chest, which rose and fell as I struggled to take in enough air.

"You're so fucking hot babe, you don't even know," Nico groaned as I stared up at him, glassy eyed. Taking me in, body splattered by my own cum and red welts all over my neck and chest, courtesy of Nico, the boy's eyes glazed over as he crushed another searing kiss against my mouth, again and again and again. Mouth moving against mine, Nico spoke, words that made my half-hard dick twitch in an attempt to get hard again.

"Babe, I just want to bend you over this desk and fuck you," Nico growled, fingers gripping my hips tightly as he bit into my shoulder. My dick pulsed again. Pulling back slightly to look at me, mouth curled upwards, Nico squeezed his fingers. " *Can I?* "

"Yes," I said, voice a little too desperate, dripping with want. "Yes, yes, okay. Please. Please. *Please* ."

Nico didn't need to be told twice.

His muscular arms effortlessly pulled my off the desk, ass dragging across the dark wood before being flipped over. I let out a grunt as my elbows hit the desk, Nico pressing his weight against my back while dragging hot kisses across my shoulder blades and spine. Nico's hands moulded themselves to me, and I was putty in his hands, responding to his every touch easily. I was melting, dripping, and absolutely hard once again, my erection bumping against the edge of the table with delicious friction every time my body moved.

"Oh my *God* ," I gasped, Nico's fingers brushing across the crevice of my ass, his thumb rubbing over my puckered hole, which no doubt contracted at the sensation. My body knew this feeling, it knew this touch. It knew Nico, and it was ready. More than ready.

My moan was muffled into my forearm as Nico slipped his finger inside, the single digit swirling and hooking against my insides. Moving in and out, Nico didn't warn me when he decided to add a second finger, my knees buckling.

"Nico, *ngh* , fuck, I can't," I whimpered, forehead pressed against the desk as Nico's fingers stretched my ass out, preparing me for what was to come, what I was waiting for. I whined in disappointment when Nico's fingers slipped out, leaving me feeling empty. A momentary rustle, the rip of a condom packet, and Nico's hands were back on me, my body pressing into his touch. While I couldn't form words as the tip of Nico's cock nudged against my opening, my body told him enough as I jerked my ass up, the head of his penis pressing through the ring of my ass. Nico groaned at the sensation, my body shaking.

Even though my mouth was hanging open, unable to form coherent words, my body told Nico everything;

I want you, I want you, I want you.

I need you.

I love you.

Please.

Nico heard me loud and clear, as he always did. Our voices coiled together in the air Nico's hips slammed into my ass, his cock embedded inside my to the hilt. I could feel Nico's member twitch inside me, the vein on the underside pushing at my walls.

"Shit, you're still so fucking tight, Wes," Nico groaned, his hands tightening around my hips, his own jerking back only slightly before bucking forward, sending spasms up my spine and down my dick. I felt my hard penis leak as it shook, the inside of my thighs become damp. I was sure that the edge of the desk just as wet as I was, my dick rubbing into it whenever Nico would thrust into me.

With every one of Nico's thrusts, each one seeming to reach deeper into me than the last and each one undoing me just a little bit more, the breath was knocked out of me until I was a panting, whimpering mess splayed across the desk.

"N-Nico," I cried out again, hand reaching down to bring some comfort to my aching dick, which was so, so close to coming again.

"Yeah, I'm - *ungh*, *fuck* - close too, babe," Nico panted, swallowing thickly as he pounded into me, his movements become jerky and erratic. "So fucking close."

"Nico. Nico, Nico, *Nico* ," I chanted, unable to think of anything else as my mind flashed with white, my body tensing as I came for a second time. Nico swore as he came buried deep in my ass, his torso folding itself across my back as he did. I could feel his laboured breaths fanning across my shoulders, his mouth pressed in a mindless open-mouthed kiss. Then, slowly, his lips pressed against the skin between my shoulder blades gently, almost reverently. I let out a content, exhausted sigh, reaching my arm back to card my fingers through Nico's hair, eliciting a muted grunt from my boyfriend.

After a few moments, Nico pulled out of me, the movement making me stop breathing for a brief second. Legs unable to support me, I slid off the

desk and onto the floor, back resting against the side. Nico slid down beside me, arms pulling me into him, peppering small kisses to the crown of my head. Nico chuckled then, his breath making my hair flutter, making me look up at him.

"What?" I asked, sex-hazed smile on my face. Nico shrugged, thumb trailing along the rim of my lips gently.

"Nothing much," Nico mused, kissing the tip of my nose. "Just thinking that this was a bit different from that first time. I mean, I didn't need to get you drunk."

"You're an asshole," I said, giving Nico a look that was supposed to be of annoyance, but from the elated expression on Nico's face, it probably didn't quite deliver. Nico's eyes turned into crescents as he smiled, pulling my head so it rested on his shoulder, the both of us needing more than a moment's rest to recover.

I didn't know how long we spent in that room, the two of us wrapped up in each other's arms long after the glow of our orgasms faded away. In that room, there was only me and Nico; we were away from the loud music, the screaming drunks, the other couples having noisy sex, and it was wonderful. Our bubble was only popped when my phone rang harshly from the pocket of my discarded pants.

Still too spent to move anywhere, Nico took it upon himself to crawl over to my phone, pulling it out.

"Benny's calling," Nico said, voice still a little rough, his wrist twisting to show my the screen.

"Answer it," I said, wincing as I sat myself up, making my way over to Nico. Passing the phone to me, I flinched when Benny's obnoxiously loud voice screeched through the receiver.

" *You guys leeeeeeft meeeee! How... How dare you guys leave me. Where are youuuuuu?!* " Benny yelled, his words slurred and lilted. Drunk. Definitely, 110% drunk off his ass.

"We're... We're down the hall somewhere. In the study," I said vaguely, Nico snickering as he began to pull on his pants, much to my disappointment. Seeing Nico pick up my own pants to pass them to me, I cheekily raised my leg upwards, eyes holding Nico's as I grinned. From Nico's smile, he seemed to catch on quite quickly, though he only moved when I gave my ankle a little shake. Grabbing my ankle, which made my stomach tighten uncontrollably once again, Nico slipped my foot into my pants, hands dragging up my leg as he pulled my pants on for me. When they were on, Nico hovering over me as a result, giving me a long, relaxed kiss, which was interrupted by Benny's shrieking once again.

" *Whaaaat?! Where's that! Where's the hallway?! What's study? I don't know what country that is!"* Benny wailed, voice rising in panic.

Laughing, Nico jerked his head towards my phone, amused. "He's really gone, huh? Kind of reminds me of someone..."

"Shut up," I said, kicking Nico slightly.

"Shut upppp?! Why are you so mean to me, Wes? I thought... I thought we were best friends. Are we no longer best friends? I don't want to not be best friends with you," Benny cried out, making me shoot out a snort.

"We're still best friends, Benny, don't worry. Just tell me where you are, Nico and I will come to you."

"Pool! I'm at the pool! Wes-oo-lee, it's too warm, I really, really, really wanna swim. Yeah, I'm gonna do it! I'm gonna swim!" I heard Benny say, his voice climbing in pitch. Nico looked at me when he heard Benny's words, the two of us quickly getting up and rushing to the pool. The scene outside had changed a lot since before Nico and I disappeared into the study; where people were all alive and somewhat well before, there were now a large amount of people drunkenly passed out along the hallway. Others, slightly more sober but still out of it, stumbled over legs and dropped bottles, giggling merrily.

When we got outside, we immediately saw Benny's figure, his head obscured by his shirt that he was trying to pull over his head. Somehow, his

arms had gotten tangled in the sleeves, his whole body wriggling in a futile attempt to detangle his drunken self from his own clothes.

"Benny," I called, the tangled-shirt-monster turning towards the noise. The sudden movement seemed to be too much for Benny, as he tripped on his own feet, his body tumbling backwards into the pool. His body his the water with a smack that would have probably hurt if Benny wasn't so out of it, water sloshing out of the pool with a splash.

"Oh, shit!" I exclaimed, quickly rushing forward as Benny flailed around in the water, still trapped in his own shirt and unable to keep his head above water. Jumping into the pool without a second thought, I latched onto Benny's body, dragging him to the edge of the pool where Nico managed to grab him under the armpit, dragging him out of the pool. Nico didn't look worried as Benny squirmed on the ground, simply pulling Benny's shirt down so he was no longer trapped, Benny blinking up at Nico with a dazed expression on his face.

"You okay, Benny?" Nico asked as I pulled myself out of the pool, clothes and body sopping wet. Seeing me move in his periphery, Benny turned to me, blinking rapidly again.

"Why are you wet?" Benny asked, before giggling. "Did you go swimming?! I wanna go swimming too!"

"Okay, that's it," I said, wringing the hem of my shirt out, water slapping against the ground. "You're going home."

"What?! Why!" Benny whined, shaking his head. The movement caused water to spray everywhere, Benny behaving like a damp dog shaking off its coat. "But it's *fun* here!"

"No buts," I said sternly, Benny shaking his head adamantly.

"I wanna stay!"

"Benny, I'm dripping cold and wet, I need to go home just as much as you do," I said, Nico smirking a little at my comment, my face reddening as I

realised he interpreted that sentence in a different way than I had intended.

"I don't wanna go!" Benny retorted, like a petulant child. An overgrown, drenched child. With the way that he was right now, it would be nearly impossible to get him to the car.

"Babe, we could get Colin to pick him up? When he gets here, he can look after Benny and then I can take us home," Nico offered, eyes softening as he looked at me and my wet clothing, clearly seeing me tremble a little with cold. After observing me for a moment, seeming to make up his mind that it probably was a good idea for us to go home, he called Colin. After exchanging a few quick words with his friend, the three of us waited for Colin to arrive to babysit Benny, who was still trying to go for a swim, much to my annoyance and Nico's amusement.

After managing to steer Benny away from the pool for the fifth time, I almost cried in relief when Colin's muscular form sauntered over to us, his mouth already curled in a smile as he took in the scene in front of him.

"You guys look like you had fun," Colin said, voice far too chirpy for the time of the evening it was. Looking at Benny, who was flapping his arms in a way that made water fly from his sleeves in haphazard arcs, Colin's smile only deepened. "He looks like he had way more fun though."

"Too much fun," I sighed, Colin laughing. "Do you mind, um, looking after him and getting him home? I know it's late and all, but..."

"Oh, yeah, it's no problem," Colin said, waving away my concern. "I have to do this all the time with the guys. Isaac is always getting shit faced, so I'm always having to drive him home."

"Even though he doesn't look it, Colin was always one of the more responsible ones," Nico said, bumping fists with Colin before taking my hand in his, pulling me close in a bid to keep me warm. "Thanks, Colin. We'll leave Benny to you. I'm going to get Wes home before he freezes to death."

"Yeah, leave him to me," Colin said, snorting as Benny began to make his way to the pool again. Being so tall and muscular, Colin barely had any trouble restraining Benny, simply looping his arm around Benny's waist to drag him away from the pool and inside. Before he entered the doors, Colin gave Nico and I a wave, he and my best friend disappearing from sight.

"Benny will be okay, right?" I asked, brow furrowing in worry. Nico nodded, humming before wrapping his arms around me, warmth flooding through my soaked skin.

"He'll be fine, Colin's got him. You, though, need to get warmed up," Nico said, wolfish grin on his face. There was something in Nico's grin that told me that this night was far from over, and I was okay with that.

More than okay.

A/N: Phew, this was a much longer chapter than normal - it was 6000 words while my chapters are usually only just over 2000 :) I knew I was gonna write another smut scene sometime in this story, but I was kind of deciding when, but the story kind of decided for me. It honestly just steered itself into the smut on its own accord, and I just went with the flow lol Not that I mind. I just hope you guys enjoyed it, because even though I am keen to write this content, I don't think I'm awfully good at it because I'm honestly the biggest prude irl lmao

On another note, there really isn't too much left to go of this story - only a few more chapters + the epilogue! I'm missing my boys already. BUT there may or may not be one or two bonus chapters from Nico's POV *subtlebutnotsubtlewink* What those chapters will be about however... Well, you'll have to wait and see ;)

FIFTY-ONE

A number of weeks had passed since the formal after party, and while some things had quietened down, exams were looming and bringing a whole new kind of drama. I was somewhat thankful that exams were right around the corner; the other students were too busy focused on cramming everything they can, and even the most dedicated gossipers didn't have time to dwell on me and Nico, and the shit-storm that had trailed in our wake. Even Benny - energetic, happy-go-lucky Benny - was holed up in his dungeon of a home trying to absorb his textbook content on Stalin and the Cold War at ungodly hours in the night, his online screams of frustration only tapering off at around 3am.

The holidays had come quickly after everything unfurled, two blissful weeks without hearing the whispers of students at my back, or the curious stares from behind strategically positioned textbooks. Surrounding myself with my small but perfect group of friends, as well as my supportive, healing family, I felt lighter. Free. No Daniel or Alyssa to worry about (not that they had been at school, since word had finally gotten out to the teachers about the true extent of what they did), no gossip, no hatred.

Sofia and Parker had also been out of the picture; after the showdown in the halls, I had only seen glimpses of the pair every now and then, only when we spontaneously collided into each other in the halls between classes. I made it my mission to avoid them at all costs, and though they still gave me an atomic stink eye when they noticed me, after their reputations got shoved into the dirt last time they didn't move to stir up any further drama.

And frankly, I didn't need any more drama, considering how exams were providing that by the bucketful.

Since the majority of my year had been spent stressing over Nico and my sexuality, I had neglected my studies somewhat. Never having grades that dropped below an A minus, I had a few string of Bs in some subjects, a thought that often made me wake up from a fitful sleep prematurely, anxiety

seizing my chest. Unfortunately, once I had awoken, the pressure of the upcoming exams pulled at my conscious and rendered me unable to fall back asleep. Fortunately though, this allowed me to study longer, harder, and somewhat better.

Rubbing at my tired eyes, dark circles prominent, I pushed open the door to Ms Levenson's office. While Ms Levenson was my biology teacher, she was also the head of the Year 12 department, and thus made it her duty to meet with everyone to discuss their exam preparation and also offer career guidance. Now, the woman herself sat there behind her desk, eyes glancing up when she heard me enter. A pile of papers were in front of her - the results of my mock exams - and my stomach twisted nervously.

Seeing me fiddling with the hem of my shirt with discomfort, Ms Levenson's steely face managed to soften a fraction, her voice gently telling me to take a seat. I did so stiffly, gulping when her fingers combed through some more papers, lips pursed together thoughtfully.

"Wesley," Ms Levenson said, a small sigh leaving her lips. *Ugh, a sigh is not what I want to hear right now.*

"Y-Yes?" I stammered, swallowing thickly.

"You're a good student, one of the brightest - if not *the* brightest - in your year," Ms Levenson said, my head nodding slowly as she looked at me again, piercing eyes silently making sure that I was listening. "I've taught you personally, and I know that first hand. These grades here, they can give me an indication of how you're going, but there's always more to it than a few numbers of a sheet." Ms Levenson made a point of pushing the papers with my less than stellar grades to the side, leaning her elbows against her desk, looking at me intently before speaking again.

"My grades have dropped a bit, though..." I said meekly, Ms Levenson sighing again. *I really don't want to hear sighs right now.*

"Wesley, you have so much potential, and I know what you're capable of. Your other teachers do to," Ms Levenson said, giving me a long look, her face twitching as she seemed to try to find her words. "I know that you had

a... hard time at the end of last term, and to be honest, things were handled shoddily by all parties involved," Ms Levenson said, eyes looking down apologetically.

"I don't want to dwell on things that have passed, though," my teacher continued, pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose. "What I'm saying is, that even with everything happening, you're still doing well in class. You say that your grades have dropped, but only relative to you - you're still one of the top students in your grade. But it's good to see that you have high expectations for yourself, it's good motivation. I'm sure you're nervous, but trust me when I say this - your effort will be rewarded." Ms Levenson managed another small smile, one that began to chip away at the exam anxiety that had been building within me over the past week.

"Thank you," I said, voice quiet. Ms Levenson nodded, as if to assure me that she was only speaking the truth, before pulling out another sheet of paper and a pen.

"Now, Wesley, just before you go, have you put any thought into your future career and study plan? Last time we had a career meeting, you were still undecided," Ms Levenson said, clicking her pen twice. "Have you figured anything out?"

"I have," I said, lips curving upwards into a small smile. "I, um, study science."

"Ah, as a biology teacher, I wholeheartedly approve of this choice," Ms Levenson chuckled, jotting down a few notes. "Science can open the doors to a few different career opportunities, and is often just taken as an undergraduate course for other disciplines. Do you have an idea of what you want to do after?" Ms Levenson tilted her head inquisitively, stoic face yielding its usual expression for one of curiosity.

"Um, yes," I said, cheeks heating a little. "I, um, maybe want to teach. Science. Biology, mainly."

"Ah," Ms Levenson said, her eyes lighting up and a large smile gracing her face, one that was larger than any I had ever seen from her. "I guess it

would be a disservice to myself if I didn't support you in this decision." At her words, the two of us shared a short laugh, Ms Levenson nodding at the end of it happily. "You seem to have clear goals for the future, and it's good to see. If you have no questions, then you're free to go."

"No, I'm... I'm okay," I said, sureness in my words. Nodding again, Ms Levenson gestured to the door, a smile on her face.

"When you leave, you can call the next person in. God help them," Ms Levenson added, making me chuckle as she sighed heavily. "Happy studies, Wesley."

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Nico - 10:45am
It's been a while, I miss u babe
When will u be free today?

Wesley - 11:46am
I miss u too, these past exam papers have been killing me
Maybe 6?
Nicoletta's?

Nico - 1:24pm
Yeah I should be able to make it at 6

Wesley - 5:46pm
I'm heading to the restaurant now
Are u off work yet?

Wesley - 5:59pm
I'm here
Do u want me to get a table first?

Wesley - 6:01pm
Nevermind, they don't seat people until everyone's present
I'll wait for u outside
~~~

Wesley - 6:17pm
Nico?

My thumb brushed over Nico's profile picture absently as I sat on the bench outside *Nicoletta's,* feet tapping against the cracked pavement. The air smelled like exhaust with a slight tinge of smoke. Car lights flashed against my eyelids, the sky beginning to darken. A duo of giggles erupted from beside me, my eyes flicking upwards. Hand in hand, the couple leaned into each other, both faces alight and laughter on their lips as they walked towards the restaurant door. Sharing a brief kiss, another bout of giggles, a gentle touch, the couple disappeared inside. A finger of jealousy strung at the tightly wound cords in my heart, my hand itching to be held like that.

But Nico wasn't here hold it.

My chest began to feel tight as I glanced at my phone screen again. *6:43pm.* My last message had yet to be read by my boyfriend, the greyed out ticks on the corner searing into my brain. My ass and thighs were sore, the hard wooden bench having been harshly pressed against my flesh for almost an hour.

We already hadn't seen each other in almost a week; I was busy studying, and Nico's colleague at the bar had been sick with the flu, so he had to take extra shifts to pick up the slack. On top of this, Shelly and her husband had been taking some time off work to tend for Shelly's ageing mother, who had suffered a terrible fall in her frail age, requiring someone to look after her 24/7 until she recovered. With the garage two sets of hands down, Nico again had been called in to fill in the gaps. I had begun to learn that when it came to work, my boyfriend never said no; he worked hard, and I was proud. Truly. Honestly.

These days, it wasn't uncommon for Nico to not reply for hours at a time, only able to when he was on a break during work. He had been working a lot more lately, making use of his time off school, and I was happy for him despite missing him. His absence gave me some time alone to focus on study, because God knows how little I get done when he's pressed up against my back, the smell of him pulling at my focus. So, him picking up

more shifts at both the garage and the bar worked in my favour, at least, most of the time.

Times like this, however, were not a blessing. Not when I've been sitting on a bench in front of a restaurant waiting for my boyfriend that may or may not show up. Not when I woke up an hour earlier than I had planned to power through a maths unit a little faster, making time to see him.

A bitter feeling welled up in my stomach, which gurgled. *6:58pm.* My eyes scanned the horizon, my last sprig of hope of seeing a tall, dark-haired boy rushing towards me falling to the ground when the street turned up empty. The sun dipped below the roofs of the buildings, the orange sunset glow spreading thinner and thinner. My anger flared, fingers a flurry over my phone.

Wesley - 7:00pm
I get that you're busy, but u can at least message me to tell me you're not coming
I'm going home to study

The dark feeling in my chest leaked into my fingers, my words reading sharply on the screen. My jaw clenched as I stood up, stuffing my phone into my pocket. The bus ride was quiet, and the walk home cold. By the time I dragged my feet into the kitchen, hands mindlessly making instant noodles for dinner, the sun had completely disappeared.

My stomach was filled with acid, churning with hunger, but my mouth was dry. My appetite was weak, but I dutifully slurped down the salty noodles, barely chewing as they slid down my tight throat.

"Wes?" Jamie's voice called, her form soon following the sound as she waltzed into the kitchen, Jojo at her heels. My sister raised a brow at me before filling Jojo's bowl with food, the labrador brushing past my legs happily before snapping her jaw at her food, scoffing it down in a matter of seconds.

"Hm?" I responded dully, Jamie narrowing her eyes before walking over to me, hands grabbing my shoulders.

"What's wrong?" Jamie asked quietly, giving my shoulders a squeeze, massaging them with firm but gentle pressure.

"Nothing," I said, stirring my overly soaked and puffed-out noodles absently. I felt a puff of air tickle my neck as Jamie snorted, her hands stopping their kneading to just rest against them, a supportive pressure that said *'I'm here for you.'* Smiling a little, I pat the back of Jamie's hand once, turning to look at her tiredly. "Just worried about exams."

"Ah," Jamie said, nodding as she began massaging my shoulders again. "Well, if it helps, I survived them, and I'm dumb as shit compared to you."

I laughed at that, nodding appreciatively, Jamie gasping in mock offence.

"Hey, you're not supposed to agree! What you're supposed to say is: 'no, you're not, my incredibly intelligent older sister, you are very, very smart and I aspire to be like you," Jamie said, huffing. Hitting my shoulder once in jest, Jamie then ruffled my hair, the motion comforting.

"Seriously though, Wes," Jamie said, voice tranquil. "Right now, it may seem like it'll never end, or that there's no hope. I get the whole 'impending sense of doom' thing, you know? But you'll get through it. You always do."

Hearing Jamie's words, my throat began to feel clogged as my eyes grew hot. Nodding and muttering a small 'thank you,' I was relieved when Jamie stepped back to clean up after Jojo, who had slobbered over her dinner and the floor. Jamie, preoccupied with our slob of a dog, gave me a smile and a supportive thumbs up as I disappeared with a quick 'I'm going to study'.

When I got to my room, the walls quilted in darkness, the burn behind my eyes increased. Flicking on all the lights that I could, the bright bulbs still unable to lighten the feeling in my heart. I planted myself at my desk and opened my maths textbook, the digital clock reading a loud and clear *8:04pm* . I stared at my text books, willing myself to study, but I couldn't. Not at all. Not when I couldn't see past my tears.

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It had taken me the good part of an hour to get my shit together. An hour of crying stupidly, eyes rubbed raw and tears completely dried up. It took me an hour of cursing Nico into my pillow, cursing at the past papers that asked ridiculous questions that no one can answer, and cursing at myself for not being able to answer them.

I hadn't checked my phone since I got home, and I'm sure that it had probably run out of charge sometime during the past hour while it was sitting face down on my bedside table. I was sure that Nico had finished work by now, and that he had probably seen my biting message and replied. Whether he apologised, or responded with an equally cutting message, I didn't know. I didn't want to know.

'Focus, Wes,' I scolded myself, shaking out the pang in my chest as I focused on the vector formulas wavering in front of my eyes. If there was one thing that I enjoyed about maths, it was the dull repetition of it all, the mindless plugging in of numbers as I went through the sample questions systematically. The clack of my calculator and scratching of my pen against paper helped me drown out the noise inside my head, schooling it into silence.

Knock, knock.

The mathematical drone in my head was interrupted by the knocking on my door, likely Jamie bringing me a mid-evening snack to help keep me alive during one of my lengthy study sessions.

"You can come in, Jamie," I called, not turning my head up from my books. The door opened, Jamie walking towards me in silence. A plate of cookies landed on top of the pile of completed papers by my right elbow, alongside a mug of steaming hot tea.

"Thanks, Jamie," I said, writing down the answer to the question I was working on before looking up, smile on my face. A choked nose wrestled itself from my mouth when my eyes met blue ones, my body jumping up as if it were struck by lightning. My feet stumbled backwards, knocking the leg of my desk chair which scuttled away from me. Its wheels clacked against the notches in the wooden flooring, loud and obnoxious.

Catching the wayward chair with a large hand, Nico pushed it back to its place against my desk, eyes not leaving mine. His eyes were complicated, a swirling mixture of *something* that I had difficulty placing. Trepidation? Frustration? Something else? I dropped my eyes from his before I could decipher his expression, my own face taut and focused on staring at the dent in the floor beside Nico's feet.

"What are you doing here?" I squeezed out, my words clipped as I struggled to breathe. The question dropped a little harsher than I was expecting it to, Nico bristling.

"Because you didn't reply to my calls or messages," Nico said, voice wary. *That's the first you say to me? No apology, no explanation. Well, I wasn't the only one who didn't reply to messages here.* Nico's hands were shoved into the pockets of his jeans, body rigid, and he didn't make a move to get closer to me. His tension radiated off him in waves, making me take a step backwards, arms crossing in front of me.

"I was busy studying," I said, shrugging. "You know I leave my phone on silent when I'm revising. *Plus,* " I spoke, letting myself breathe during the pause, my lungs in need of air with how tightly they were squeezed in Nico's presence. "You didn't reply either. You know, when I was waiting for you at the restaurant for an hour." Nico's body seemed to recoil from my words, his hands slipping from his pockets, making me look up at him, anger beginning to build in my stomach. The feeling of sitting there on the bench, waiting for someone who didn't show, resurfaced and it was like I was there all over again.

"Wes, I didn't mean to-"

"But you did!" I spat, throwing my hands up in the air. "You fucking stood me up, Nico!"

"Wes, just listen to me for a second," Nico said, his voice rising to climb above mine. "Some things happened at work, a customer had-"

"I don't care what a *customer* did, I care about what *you* did - or *didn't* do," I said, tacking on the last few words with a humourless chuckle, the sound

grating to my ears.

"Jesus fucking Christ, if you shut up for just one second then I could tell you that it was out of my control," Nico said, meeting my eyes with heat. The complicated expression from just seconds ago had disappeared, and now it was clear what shone in his eyes now was anger. *Well that makes two of us.*

"Okay, try to explain to my why the hell you left me sitting there by the fucking curb waiting for you, I'd love to hear your reason," I spat, voice challenging. "It better be a fucking good excuse." Nico's teeth ground together, his jaw tight as he stared at me, hands clenched into fists by his side.

"Like I was saying," Nico said pointedly, my anger only flaring when he rolled his eyes, "a customer was throwing a massive fit in the store about how we overcharged him for his tyre change even though we gave him the quote beforehand, threatening all of us and cussing us out, the fucking asshole. Usually Shelly can shut those kinds of customers down fast, but you know she wasn't there we had to handle it. Colin said some shit, and obviously he doesn't have a degree in conflict management, so shit only escalated from there."

Nico looked at me expectantly, as if his explanation should be enough. That it was enough. But it wasn't, not for me. Not right now.

"Really? That's the best excuse you've got?" I scoffed, eyes narrowing. "That dick couldn't have been screaming for an hour. *An hour* , Nico! I was waiting for a fucking hour!"

"That's work, Wes!" Nico yelled, clenched fists unfurling as it was his turn to throw his hands in the air in fury. "I'm working flat out here, I don't always have time to text you!"

"One text, Nico! I just needed *one* text to tell me that you couldn't make it," I hissed, jerking my hand to my discarded phone.

"Well, that's rich, coming from *you* ," Nico said, mouth curling upwards into smile that didn't reach his eyes, his expression cold.

" *Me?* " I echoed incredulously, eyes widening in surprise before creasing again. "Okay, what the fuck did *I* do, Nico?"

"Oh, okay, so you're just conveniently forgetting that the other day you were supposed to call me after you finished your, what was it, mock English essay or whatever, but didn't end up calling? Because you forgot? Because you decided to start another practise essay?" Nico said, one brow rising, a provocation. "I swapped breaks with Colin to be able to answer your call, you know? Well, time fucking wasted."

"You're bringing that up now? Really?" I said, rolling my eyes heatedly. "I guess we're airing out all of this shit now, yeah? If we're going down that road, then don't forget about when you ditched me during the holidays and went out with fucking Isaac. *Isaac* , Nico! He fucking punched me and you're still hanging out with him!"

"I wasn't hanging out with him specifically, I told you!" Nico yelled again, voice reverberating off the walls, suffocating me. "I was out with my friends, Wes. Yeah, I have huge problems with him and didn't talk to him the whole time, but the others still consider him a friend. Hell, *Colin* still sees him as a friend."

"Well, and I told you that I don't like you hanging out with him. He's a fucking asshole," I said, disgust clogging my throat. Nico's eyes flashed, his larger body taking a single step towards me. My instinct was to step back, to run far, far away, but it was Nico. *Nico* . I swallowed the feeling inside my gut, keeping my feet planted where they were.

"You're my boyfriend, but you don't get to tell me who I can or can't hang out with, Wes," Nico said, voice a growl.

"Oh, so now you're 'hanging out' with that douche bag. So much for not hanging out with him *specifically* ," I said, dry laugh bitter on my tongue.

"Fuck, you know that's not what I'm saying, you're being ridiculous right now," Nico groaned. "Sometimes, I swear to God you're the most fucking annoying person on the face of the earth, you're driving me insane."

Nico's words were like a slap in the face, and they stung more and cut deeper than the time Sofia actually did slap in me in the face.

"Well you... I... Ugh, well sorry you got stuck with such a shit, annoying boyfriend, then," I said, voice cracking at the end despite my best efforts. "I'm sorry for being fucking ridiculous, being annoying, for being fucking controlling about who you not-specifically-hang-out-with." Fuck. I could feel my anger that had been boiling cool down to a shaking simmer, dropping and dropping until there was barely anything left. All that remained was a lonely coldness inside of me that made me shiver. Nico's face fell at the way my voice shook, mouth opening soundlessly, hand twitching. I let out a choked laugh, wrists desperately rubbing to hide the evidence of my tears. "Shit, I'm so fucking stupid, crying all the damn time. No wonder I'm so annoying."

I wanted to slap myself as I felt the tears I was holding back slip from my eyes, my hands scrubbing at them when they trickled down my cheeks in frustration. Pathetic. So fucking pathetic. I wanted to ride on this wave of anger, to be angry at Nico, to make him understand how bloody angry I felt sitting there on the bench all alone. But like always, all I could make him see was how fucking pitiful I was instead, crying over the stupid shit we've been screaming at each other when all I wanted was to tell him that I was angry because I really fucking missed him.

Nico didn't say anything, and just stood there motionlessly. Face covered my my hands, I couldn't see what he was doing, what expression was on his face. *I probably look so stupid right now, he's probably half way out the door.*

I couldn't help but jump when a pair of hands grasped onto my shoulders, sliding upwards to encircle my chin and pull my forwards. Body weak, I let the hands move me, my body crashing into Nico's as he pressed his mouth against mine, hard and desperate.

"Don't say that, don't say that," Nico spoke against my lips, voice still shaking with anger, but so achingly gentle at the same time. His voice made me crumble all over again, eyes shutting tight to seal in the fresh tears about to fall. "I'm sorry. You're not stupid, you're not annoying. I lied, babe. I lied. So don't say that, please."

"That's all I wanted," I whimpered, clutching onto the front of Nico's shirt, fingers digging into the fabric. "I just wanted an apology. I would've been fine with an apology."

"I know, I'm sorry," Nico said, kissing me again. And again. And again.

"I'm sorry, so let me make it up to you."

A/N: Aaaaand that's the chapter, folks! I had a sudden surge of inspiration, and I also have a pretty busy weekend and didn't want to risk leaving you guys with a late chapter, so here's an early update! This chapter is another one that's longer than normal, I really do tend to ramble :) That being said, I believe the next chapter is going to be the last main one for this story (but we've still got the epilogue, and of course, the bonus Nico POV chapter(s) as well!)

It's the home stretch now, friends! Thanks so much for sticking with this story until this point, you guys are honestly the best x

p.s. I don't know if you can tell, but I was originally planning for the smut scene to be Wes and Nico having some sweet make up sex here instead of last chapter, but considering I'm knackered from writing about those steamy times I'm gonna have to sit this one out - feel free to use your imagination though, folks~

FIFTY-TWO

A/N: Surprise update, my gift to you! Here's the last chapter before the epilogue, which I will release very soon - I'm not crying, you are. Also, here is some awesome fan art of Nico and Wes made by the even more awesome @glynfrans. I love it to pieces!

Nico collapsed on top of me with a groan, body warm and heavy. His head pressed against the skin of my shoulder and chest, which rose and fell with laboured breaths, my body still trembling with the aftermath of my orgasm. I smiled as Nico shifted his head slightly, only to press a kiss to my collar bone. Returning the gesture, I curled my arms around, one resting on Nico's forearm draped across my stomach, the other burrowing in his hair. Nico let out a sigh when I kissed his forehead, his arms pulling me closer.

"We should get you cleaned up," Nico murmured, beginning to pull himself off me. Not wanting to lose the feeling of his body pressed against mine just yet, I shook my head, tugging him back down. Nico chuckled, slumping back against me and kissing my shoulder again. "Okay, not yet, then."

"Mm," I said, running my fingers through Nico's hair, slightly damp from exertion but still silken through my digits. The two of us didn't move at all, not speaking for a while as we simply let our bodies calm down after the intense sex we had. Sex with Nico was always exciting, but something about this time was just... *more* . Maybe it was because the residue of our anger pumping through our bloodstreams, or just the pent up longing the both of us had evidently been storing for the past week.

"I'm sorry," Nico said softly, breaking the silence. My fingers faltered mid-stroke as I heard Nico's words, before continuing their gentle tugs.

"I'm sorry too," I replied, Nico moving the hand on my stomach to my chest, index finger tracing patterns across my skin. "I said lots of shit that...

Ugh. I regret what I said. I'm sorry I over-reacted. It was stupid."

"It's not stupid," Nico said, nudging my face downwards to look at him. Rolling my eyes, I shook my head, face downcast.

"No, it was stupid. Really, really stupid," I said, frowning as I recalled the words I spat at him just an hour before. Nico sighed, thumb stroking my cheek softly.

"You had the right to be mad, Wes. I shouldn't have lost my temper either. I think we've both been too stressed with everything lately, we were both bound to snap."

"But I shouldn't have gone off on you about work," I stressed, my face scrunching up at the memory. "You've been working hard and that's not a bad thing. I shouldn't have made it sound like a bad thing."

"Yeah, but I should have just messaged you that I was going to be late," Nico huffed, voice tinged with anger, but this time it was directed at himself. "I can imagine you sitting there waiting for me, and I just..." Nico's voice trailed off, my boyfriend loosing a frustrated groan as he tugged me closer again.

"We both fucked up," I said, Nico snorting loudly. "We should just leave it at that."

"Good," Nico said, voice firm. "I don't like fighting with you, it fucking sucks."

"I hate it too," I whispered, voice impossibly quiet, yet easily audible to Nico's ears considering how close we were, pressed skin-to-skin. When we were this close, it was hard to see where I ended and Nico began, but I didn't mind it at all. The two of us were silent for an unknown period of time then, the two of us just revelling in the feeling of being pressed up to one another. When I was beginning to wonder if Nico had fallen asleep, his body still and breaths stable, my boyfriend spoke in a low, almost wistful tone.

"I've never had a fight with someone like that before," Nico said, making me look at him, eyebrow raised curiously.

"What do you mean?" I asked, my mind involuntarily drifting back to the few times I had seen Nico involved in fights; with Isaac, and with Daniel and Alyssa. Shifting my body slightly as Nico pulled his own further up in the bed until our faces were level, our eyes locked and noses bumped.

"Fighting with, you know, a boyfriend," Nico said, making my cheeks heat up slightly, heart fluttering. Nico's face was serious, eyes flickering with something that sent tingles down to my toes.

"Hey, you were the one that said you had experience getting slapped by girls, don't lie to me," I teased, though Nico's expression didn't shift, his eyes only growing bluer and bluer.

"I'm serious, Wes," Nico said, flicking my nose with his fingertip. "Yeah, people have gotten angry at me before, but only because they wanted something more than I was willing to give. Their anger was one-sided, but this... with you... It's different."

"Different how?" I asked, palms pressed against Nico's chest, rising when he heaved a thoughtful breath.

"Even when those girls screamed at me or slapped me, I honestly didn't care. But you, even when you just *looked* at me all pissed, I was- *fuck* . It just made me angry, scared, worried. I hated it, hated that I made you look at me like that." Nico's mouth turned down in a clear frown as he spoke, eyes drifting off into his memories. At Nico's words and expression on his handsome face, my heart flipped, so full and swollen that I was sure it was about to burst. Suddenly, Nico's eyes flicked back to me, aflame.

"You know what? Let's not fight again," Nico said strongly, determined. The way his brow furrowed and blue eyes focused made me giggle, gently knocking our foreheads together.

"Are you kidding me? Knowing us, we're *definitely* going to get into lots of arguments. We shouldn't make promises we can't keep," I said, snickering

as Nico's frown twitched, soon morphing into a smile.

"Fair point," Nico said, hand brushing away from stray locks of hair from my face, before cupping my cheek, bringing his face closer to kiss me tenderly. "Then, let's say if we get into another fight, we *have* to have mind-blowing make-up sex afterwards."

" *Nico!* " I exclaimed, cheeks flushing. "Seriously? We were having a moment, and you go and bring up make-up sex?!"

"What?" Nico asked, eyelashes flushing with faux innocence, something I was sure Nico did not possess in the slightest. "Come on, don't tell me you didn't enjoy it."

"I-" I started, Nico's eyes boring into mine, his irises warning me to try and lie to him. Grimacing, I hit Nico on the chest lightly before hiding my face there. "It was okay."

"Hmph, just okay? Pretty sure it was more than okay by the way you were screaming a second ago, babe. The neighbours could probably hear you," Nico said, a high-pitched whine escaping my mouth as my eyes widened to saucers.

"Nico! I forgot Jamie was home!" I screeched, hands moving to cover my flaming face. "Oh my God, do you think she heard us... you know... Oh my God, no." My stomach twisted as panic poked and prodded at me, completely mortified at the idea that my sister may or may not have heard us in bed. Sure, the door was closed, but Jamie's room was right next door, and if I really was as loud as Nico was implying, then it wouldn't be hard for her to hear us through the walls.

Taking in the obviously petrified look on my face, Nico burst into a fit of laughter, hands pinching my cheeks that suddenly seemed hollow and pale.

"Babe, Jamie is probably the last person on earth who would care," Nico said, and I shook my head adamantly.

"You say that because she's not your sister! I don't need my sister hearing my sex sounds!" I yelled. There was a loud thump from next door, something clearly dropping onto the floor, and the noise only confirmed my worst nightmare. "Oh God. We're never doing this at my place again."

"Maybe we should move out together, then," Nico said. His words were so casually dropped into the conversation, as if they were an after thought. It took me a few moments to process what Nico said, before I pushed backwards in his arms, staring at my boyfriend, flabbergasted.

"What?" I spluttered, Nico shrugging.

"We could move out together," Nico said slowly, as if I were deaf. "I mean, not *now* , but after you graduate, maybe. I've been thinking about it. I mean, these days we basically always stay at each other's places anyway, and it would be easier if we moved somewhere closer to my work and your uni, wherever you get into." Nico spoke, his words picking up as he began to ramble, only stopping when I noticed me staring at him slack jawed. Nico smiled, almost shyly, before speaking again. "Uh, but only if you want to. It was just a thought."

"Really?" I asked, voice small. "Do you really... want to move in together? Really? *Really?* "

Nico laughed then, kissing the tip of my nose.

"Yes, really," Nico said, chuckling at my wide-eyed expression. "I'll take that as a yes?"

"Hell yes!" I said, almost a scream as I barrelled myself into Nico's embrace, my boyfriend letting out a gust of air as I slammed into him before returning my hug ten-fold.

Yes. Of course it's a yes. A hundred, million times - yes.

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Finishing my last exam left me with a strange feeling. Relief was obviously there, but it was more than that. For something that seemed so grand, something that we've been working towards for years to be over with the buzz of a clock and the shuffling of papers, everything seemed anticlimactic. Too calm, a little empty.

Exams are over. They're finally over.

While everything felt still around me, I could hear other students screaming and crying, the past two weeks of stress seeming to break the dam inside of them. People hugged, others began to rip their exam notes into shreds, others seemed like their souls had left their bodies already.

Walking past the groups of newly freed students, I made my way to the front of the school, a familiar car already sitting by the curb. Nico saw me the moment I stepped out of the gate, hugging me with a questioning smile on his face.

"It was okay," I said, answering his silent question while letting out a breath that I had seemed to be holding since I walked out of the exam room. "I think it was okay."

"You seem a little out of it, babe," Nico said, rubbing my back.

"It's just weird that it's all over," I said, laughing a little. "I've been studying so much, I don't know what to do with my time now."

"Well, I have a few ideas," Nico said, wiggling his brow suggestively, making me shove his shoulder playfully.

"Shut up," I said, rolling my eyes, smile widening.

"Fine, I'll save *that* for later," Nico said, slapping my ass as I got into his car, making me yelp in surprise. When he slid into the driver's seat, hand on mine, he grinned. "So, where to, Wes?"

"Anywhere," I said, reaching over to clasp Nico's hand in mine. *I'd go anywhere with you.*

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The assembly hall was abuzz with excitement, students giving each other elated glances, legs bobbing as they waited eagerly to get on stage. At the evening valedictory ceremony, alongside the air of excitement was one of finality; this would be the last time we would all be together, everyone crammed shoulder to shoulder in our school's hall about to graduate. Being summer, the air was stuffy and hot, and our school still made us wear our blazers. Everyone was sweating, but no one complained.

I glanced around the packed room, filled not only with students, but with parents as well. Since the hall could only fit so many, only parents were invited, but since dad was out of the picture, Jamie came too. Spotting my family by the far wall, their eyes already on mine, I felt a swell of emotion burst inside of me. Jamie gave me a wave, a huge grin on her face, while mum nodded, eyes a little glassy. Swallowing thickly, worried I would start tearing up if I stared at them too long, I instead searched the hall fo Benny. Since we were seated in alphabetical order, Benny was near the front of the rows of students, and would be one of the first to walk on stage to get their certificate.

Sensing me staring at him, Benny turned around, excitement lighting up his jovial face.

"We made it," Benny mouthed, making me nod, mirroring his smile with my own. As we grinned at each other, the Principal Myers began speaking in his dull drone, congratulating us on completing our studies. As he began reading out the names of the students, the first girl standing up with an elated beam, the hall erupted with applause.

"Benjamin Adams," Principal Myers called, Benny almost tripping as he stood up, too eager to collet his certificate. I smothered my laugh into my hand as he bounded up the stairs onto the stage, a bundle of energy that made the Vice Principal give him an odd look. From the stage, Benny seemed to spot his parents, giving them a wild wave which made everyone chuckle.
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More names were called, and little by little the students in front of me began to disappear. Soon enough, the student beside me was standing up, excitement buzzing in my head.

"Wesley Dillon," Principal Myers said, glancing at me. Sucking in a breath, I made my way up to the stage, the lights blinding. I shakily collected my certificate, mumbling a thank you to the Vice Principal when she congratulated me on graduating, moving past her quickly. Glancing at the crowd, my eyes squinted past the lights to see mum now fully bawling, and Jamie with her fingers between her lips, a piercing whistle slicing through the air amongst the applause. Smiling, I nodded towards them before letting my eyes wander across the walls that held portraits of past principals, and award boards with golden names engraved onto them. My eyes moved past them all, probably for the last time in my life, before they fell onto someone standing at the very back, hidden among the crowd.

I almost dropped my certificate right there on the stage, my mouth popping open.

Although he wasn't graduating, and while he definitely was not invited to the valedictory ceremony, Nico stood there, blue eyes impossibly bright against the stage lights. Seeing me notice him, the breath knocked right out of me, Nico's mouth pulled into a smile, one filled to the brim with pride. As more students moved past the stage, lining up beside me and whispering excitedly, all I could do was stare at my boyfriend and think. Think that, with this, everything was perfect. It was perfect.

The rest of the ceremony was a blur, everyone singing the school song for the last time with tears in their voices and ending with a crescendoed cry as we were formally released. Everyone rushed out of the hall to embrace their parents and hug their friends, taking photos to remember this moment, hopefully, for the rest of their lives.

Finding my own family, Jamie slinging her arm over my shoulders and mum taking photos of me in my uniform with my certificate with tears dripping down her face, I indulged them in their actions for a while, until I couldn't resist glancing around the courtyard for Nico.

Jamie, noticing me surveying the crowd with keen focus, smirked.

"Your boyfriend's over there, Wes," Jamie said, shit-eating grin on her face, one that reminded me too much of Benny. "We've gotten enough pictures of you now, I guess we can share you with him."

"Shut up," I said, rolling my eyes to try and hide the embarrassed look on my face, giving mum a quick hug before wading my way through the crowd to find my boyfriend, who had been lying low on the outskirts, trying to avoid the teachers that were mingling with parents and students. When I began to near him, Nico gave me a cheeky grin, stepping backwards away from me. One step, two steps, three steps.

Furrowing my brow, all I could do was follow Nico, who was beginning to step further and further away from me, until he turned around to break out into a leisurely run. Moving away from the courtyard, I yelled after Nico, who laughed and simply waved for my to *hurry up* .

Stupid long-legged bastard, he knows I can't catch up to him.

"Nico, don't be an ass, slow down!" I yelled, Nico laughing as he whirled around, stopping in his tracks to extend a hand towards me. When I finally reached him, slapping his hand away while giving him an exasperated look, I grumbled under my breath in complaint. Nico only laughed, snatching my hand in his to lace our fingers together tightly, tugging me forwards.

"Follow me," Nico said, my feet stumbling after him, head tilting to the side curiously.

"Where?" I asked, Nico winking.

"Isn't that obvious?" Nico asked, turning around the corner, past the cafeteria, down a path lined with shrubs and weeds towards the pool.

Ah. I should've known.

Giggling a little as I realised where we were going, Nico squeezed my hand.

"I'm not going to miss many things about this place, but I'm sure as hell going to miss this," Nico murmured as we reached the shed. Instead of trying for the door like we usually did, Nico pulled me around to the side, making me poke him questioningly.

"Okay, so you're dragging me behind the shed to kill me, is that it?" I joked, Nico only responding with a hum. Skirting along the back wall of the pool, Nico stopped in front of a window, fiddling with a broken latch and sliding the window upwards, turning to give me a mischievous look.

"I've always been wondering why we only stayed in that storeroom when the pool is right here," Nico said, nodding his head towards the open window, the smell of chlorine wafting out.

"Probably because we would have gotten into deep shit if they caught us there," I said bluntly, Nico rolling his eyes. "Okay, Mr Rebellious, just because you're a rule-breaker doesn't mean I'm one. At least, not all the time."

" *Okay* , Mr Dux of the School," Nico teased back, making me flush. "But now you've officially graduated, so you can't really get in trouble any more. Let's go."

He wasn't wrong there.

Grinning, stomach fluttering with anticipation, I nodded. Nico grabbed onto my hips to hoist me up, his touch searing. I let out a grunt as I slipped through the window, landing on the tiled floor with an echoing thud. Nico followed behind me nimbly, movements far less clumsy than mine.

The pool was dark, the moonlight casting shadows across the water, which sat still and tranquil. There was no noise in the large room apart from our breaths, and the sound of our footsteps as we walked inwards, eyes locked on each other.

When we reached the edge of the pool, back of my knees bumping the covered diving blocks, Nico stepped in front of me. The shadows cast elegant shapes across his beautiful face, his eyes impossibly bright. The

moonlight reflected off his lip ring, tempting me as it always did. Nico seemed to sense the shift in my thoughts, corner of his mouth curling in an endearingly lop-sided grin.

Slowly, so, so slowly, Nico pulled on the hem of my blazer, peeling it from my stomach. He didn't have to coax me to shrug it off, the heavy garment falling to the floor around my feet. Seeing Nico kicking off his shoes, I did the same. Expecting Nico to begin taking his top off, my hands already fingering the buttons of my school shirt, I let out a gasp when his hands suddenly wound around me, my body soon falling in an arc through the air.

I landed in the water with a splash, my arms flailing and my shout clamped shut as water rushed around me. I resurfaced with a curse on my mouth, Nico laughing wildly, the sound bouncing around the room and in my heart.

"You're such an ass!" I said, trying to sound stern but failing miserably when a snort burst from me, a laugh following immediately after. Wading towards the edge of the pool, my school uniform sticking to my body, I slung my arms over the edge as Nico kneeled down. Nico's hand reached out, pushing my wet hair from my face, the fabric around his knees darkening as water sloshed out from the pool to where he sat. Leaning downwards, Nico cupped my face, giving me a slow, warm kiss.

"Congrats on graduating, babe," Nico murmured against me, making me break the contact as I smiled.

"Mhmm, thanks," I said, pulling back to grip onto the front of Nico's T-shirt, water seeping through the fabric. "Now hurry up and join me."

Nico let out another laugh, eyes crinkling in the corners as he let me pull him in, his large body tumbling in. Nico resurfaced seconds after, smoothing his dark hair from his face before pulling me towards him for another kiss, our legs bumping together as we kept our heads above water. We floated there for a while, smiling and giggling as we playfully splashed around the pool, drowning and floating and unbelievably happy.

Meeting in the middle of the pool, gripping onto each other tightly, Nico pressed his forehead to mine.

"I'm so glad to have met you," he whispered, the words drifting across the water as a wave washed over me.

"Me too," I replied, voice rough with emotion. "I'm so lucky to have met you."

The words came easily, because they were true. So very, very true. Everything around me was surely about to change; I was no longer in high school, no longer bound by my fears and finally coming into who I was. The future was here, and I didn't know where it would lead me, and that fact alone was as daunting as it was exhilarating.

Yes, I didn't know what would happen in the future, where I'll go or what I'll do, but one thing that I knew for sure was that Nico would be there, every step of the way.

Always.

A/N: And that's it for the main story, only the epilogue to go now T_T I won't say much here because I'll have a long and sappy note after the epilogue, but wow, it's been one heck of a journey, one that I'm super grateful to have shared with you. Love you all to bits x

EPILOGUE

10 Years Later

Sitting on the floor by the coffee table, legs crammed beneath the smooth glass surface, I let out a fatigued sigh. Pulling my glasses off to rub at my aching nose bridge, I closed my eyes to rest them for a moment, the reports spread in front of me beginning to blur. Opening them again, I stretched my weary limbs, before leaning my head back to rest against the edge of the couch behind me. Our modest apartment was a little dark, with only the copper floor lamp casting a dim glow over the coffee table. For a while now, the apartment had been quiet save for the rhythmic scratching of pen against paper.

It has been ten years since I graduated highschool, and just a little more than that since I've been with Nico. Living together for the past four years, while our relationship was very much set in stone, like every relationship there were some bumps in the road. Sometimes our paths curved away from each other, or went over a bumpy road, but in the end they always reunited. I couldn't imagine a life without Nico, and I knew he felt the same way.

After everything, it seemed only fitting for me to pursue a career in science, though some were surprised when I decided to not only study it, but to teach it. Now teaching biology to unruly teenagers, the events of my youth seemed so far away. It was a long time ago, but every now and then, something would remind me about those times and everything would come back with a startling clarity that always made me lose my train of thought.

Looking at the papers below me, I couldn't help but smile, the curve of my lips full of nostalgia.

"So, when are you free so we can do this experiment?"

"Huh? One second," Alyssa said, fingers clacking on her phone as her friend peered over her shoulder.

"Oh, yeah, no problem," I said, words drawn out sarcastically as I hefted my books onto my other arm, already tired. "It's not like I have anywhere to be."

"I'm free this weekend," Nico's husky voice suddenly spoke, Alyssa's head snapping up from her phone, fingers poised mid-emoji as she blinked.

"What?" both Alyssa and I said in unison, Nico just looking up at me, a hidden smile on his lips.

Picking up the useless piece of paper from the table and unfurling it, Nico waved it in front of my face.

"We're swapping partners," Nico said coolly, not even looking at Alyssa as he got up from his chair, hands in his pockets. As he walked past me, his shoulder bumped with mine, his head tilting downwards to look at me. "Let's go."

Shaking my head at the memory, I couldn't help but find that the apartment was a little empty without Nico's presence. Even after living with each other for so long, I still missed him whenever he wasn't beside me. Lately, he had been even busier than usual; after years of hard work, Nico had just managed to open his own restaurant. Sure, it was small, and the plot of land that he bought needed a lot of work, but it was *his* . But, because of the work that he needed to put into it to get it up and running, he had been spending less and less time at home.

Slapping my cheeks at my self-apparent loneliness, I pushed away some of the papers I was grading, checking my laptop for any emails or messages, sliding my glasses back on as I did so. As I opened up my email, a new message popped up, and my stomach flipped like it always did.

Neil Dillon.

I had rarely spoken to my father since he decided to leave us for another man. Since that day when I was 17, the only connection we had was on my birth certificate. We went for six years without contacting each other, and it was only four years ago that Nico asked me to contact him. I was reluctant

at first, still bitter at what he did to mum, Jamie and I back then, but Nico had given me a sullen, knowing look that made me think twice.

"He's still your father. The relationship I have with mine is completely gone, but you might still have a chance. You'll never know if you don't try, babe."

It had only taken that little slither of encouragement for me to reach out to my father, even if in a curt email. He had replied back almost straight away, a little too eager, but also relieved. Apparently he had found out that I was gay after keeping tabs on my social media, though it was only recently since I never shared anything too personal online. Since then, we have been conversing over email regularly. We weren't at the stage where I would be willing to meet with him, and his new family, and I didn't know if I would ever be ready.

I probably couldn't forgive him, but for Nico, I was willing to try.

Quickly replying to my father's email, each one becoming easier than the last, I quickly checked the rest of my messages. There were a few from Benny, whose 9-to-5 finance job gave him ample time at his desk to spam me with messages. He hadn't changed too much, although a lot had happened in his own life since we graduated from highschool. He got into university, he graduated from being a virgin, and he graduated from being single. Colin was responsible for two out of three of those milestones - but that's a whole other story.

After replying to only half of Benny's random assortment of messages, I made myself a cup of tea before forcing myself back into the cesspool of highschool biology assignments. After finding my rhythm, my mind and my hand methodically working through the assignments, I barely registered when the front door of the apartment opened, Nico's tall form stepping through.

"Babe, I'm home," Nico called, making me smile, looking up from the grammatically incorrect paper I was grilling. Seeing me sitting there, wearing his hoodie, Nico gave me a lopsided grin. Throwing his coat onto the back of a barstool by the kitchen, Nico quickly disappeared into our bedroom, emerging again wearing his pyjamas. Wasting no time, he crossed

the small expanse of the room, climbing onto the couch behind my head. Situating his legs around either side of me, Nico bent down, pressing a kiss to the back of my head. Inhaling deeply, Nico let out a content yet exhausted sigh.

"Long day?" I asked, looking at the clock on my phone. It was just past midnight, Nico obviously working on the restaurant far longer than he had intended. Mumbling a tired "mhmm" against the back of my head, Nico slung his arms over my shoulders, picking up one of the papers I was marking. Eyes skimming over it, I mirrored his smile when he chuckled, the vibration of his body tickling my back.

"This assignment looks a little familiar," Nico said, turning the page. "Woah, these guys grew so many beans. But still not as much as you." Looking up at him, holding a paper like he did when he was eighteen, another wave of nostalgia washed over me. Nico looked the same yet different; he was still devilishly handsome, with the same azure blue eyes and cheeky grin, but his longer hair had been cropped short due to his profession as a chef, and his lip ring was missing. Surprisingly, I had lamented over his decision to remove his lip ring - for professionalism purposes, he had said - which Nico found amusing. Still, I had grumbled about it for a good few weeks after he first removed it, but he found plenty of ways to make it up to me.

"I'm surprised you find it familiar, considering *someone* had to write the whole thing because his partner decided he didn't want to contribute," I said, wiggling my brow as Nico whistled, feigning ignorance.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Nico said, putting the paper back down on the table, shrugging emphatically. "I remember us growing the beans in *my* wardrobe, and opening up *my* house to you to work in."

"Bell's house," I said, rolling my eyes. "It was Bell's house."

"Whatever you say, babe," Nico said, leaning down to press his weight against my back, arms still dangling over my shoulders. His tattoos peeked out from beneath his jumper, dark against his fairer skin. With Nico's

weight at my back, my body began to tilt forwards, to the point that I was unable to concentrate on marking the final papers in front of me.

"Nico, I'm trying to work," I whined, reaching my arm upwards to lightly slap the back of his head. Nico groaned, taking the opportunity to pull the glasses from my face and the paper from my hands, before wrapping his arms around my shoulders tightly.

"Babe, I haven't seen you all day, and you want to sit here reading about beans?"

"It's part of my job," I said simply as I moved to pick up the paper I was half way through. Nico shook his head, slamming his hand down on the paper, bolting it to the table.

"It's late, and I miss you," Nico said stated, as if he were listing out the universal truths of the universe. Getting up, Nico tugged on my arm, a slight pout on his lips. "Come to bed with me."

Staring up at Nico's face, which was both pleading and teasing at the same time, I couldn't help but cave. Muttering a curse under my breath, I let Nico hoist my up with his strong arms, which dragged me towards the bedroom. As we neared the edge of our bed, I let out a yelp as those same arms scooped me up around my waist, throwing me onto the mattress. A second startled noise escaped my open mouth as Nico jumped on top of me, his four limbs trapping me beneath him.

" *Nico!* " I huffed, rolling my eyes at Nico's amused smirk from above me.

"Babe, I missed you today," Nico said for the second time that night, his smirk morphing into a warm, heart-wrenching smile. Struggling to keep my annoyed expression up for any more than two seconds, I laughed while shaking my head, reaching up to coil my arms around Nico's neck. His arms lowered themselves around my head, his fingers tangling in my hair as he pressed a soft kiss on my lips. Pulling away only enough to rest his forehead against mine, Nico's hands gently carded through my locks, nails scraping against my scalp.

Closing my eyes at his tender touch, I smiled as Nico spoke, the rumble of his chest flush against mine.

"Did you miss me, Wes?" Nico asked, his voice a mere whisper.

Pausing for a moment, enough to make Nico's fingers stop moving through my hair, I then opened my eyes to find Nico staring down at me expectantly.

"Yeah, I missed you, too," I said honestly, Nico's face lighting up in a smile, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

Kissing me again, Nico held me close like he always has, and always will. Enveloped in the smell and feel of this man that I loved so damn much, I knew that there was no place I'd rather be. For me, I never felt happier, never felt more alive, than when I was in our...

Sheets.

A/N: Because a few people have missed them, just want to let you know that there are two bonus chapters in Nico's POV after the next chapter (i.e. after my long-winded author's note)! :)

Author's Note

Wow, what a ride! I have had this story idea - a sort of coming-of-age, coming out kind of tale - rattling around in my head for quite a while before actually sitting down to write it, and it feels good that it's now finished. A little sad as well, since I did grow quite attached to my precious boys. I'm really going to miss my disaster Wes and house-husband Nico. Once my boys, always my boys.

As my second original story on here, I honestly didn't expect it to grow as much as it did - I remember this story suddenly exploding, going from maybe 30,000 reads to 500,000 in just over two weeks. Not saying that the number of reads is what makes the story - for me, writing is something of a happy place for me, and it would be rewarding even if I had only one reader - but being able to share my work with people who enjoy reading it as much as I loved writing it is amazing. It's still so crazy to think about how much engagement this story has gotten, but I am honestly so grateful that people, like you, even decided to click on this little story in the first place. Reading all your (hilarious) comments, and getting all the support from you guys even when my update schedule went out the window really warms my heart, and I can't even express how touched I am. Seriously. *Honestly* .

A few people have messaged me/commented about a potential Benny and Colin sequel/spin-off from this story, and unfortunately I don't have any plans to write a story for those boys as I have a lot of other story ideas that I've put on the back burner while writing *Sheets* which I am keen to explore. Hope you understand!

And, lastly, I want to thank everyone who read this story through to the very end from the bottom of my little heart - you guys are the best, and I love you all to pieces.

xx S

p.s. And yes, the bonus chapter in Nico's POV is still happening! I've decided to make it more like a collection of scenes from the main story from his perspective (and when I say collection, I mean like about 15 separate scenes). And I've written 6000 words so far, and it's nowhere near done - but it's coming, I promise! Oh, and just a head's up - the bonus chapter currently has a theme of 'Nico tries to act cool, but is actually just a dork in love'. Get keen.

Beneath the Sheets: Nico's POV

A/N: And here is my last little (but not so little, it's like 14000 words) gift to you - it really is the end now :') I hope you enjoy it, and thank you, thank you, thank you for reading. Also, here's some wonderful Nico fan art by even more wonderful @rita26199 - he's beautiful!

Oh, and just a heads up - there's some sexy time at the end of the chapter *cackles in smut*

Part I

It was warm. Too warm, even. It was an unfamiliar feeling, my bed never being this warm, this comfortable. My body itched, wanting to move closer and closer to the source of warmth that seemed to be moving further and further away. Legs tangled with legs, arms sliding around a smooth torso, curling into curves that made it seem like my arms were made to fit there.

" *Nico Beckett.* "

My name hung in the air, too loud in the silence and I grumbled. The voice needed to be quiet and just let me hold it. It needed to stop wriggling. On reflex, I tightened my hold on the person, my voice sleep-ridden and rough with fatigue.

"Be quiet, I'm sleeping," I said. A moment later, the warmth was gone. Groaning at the emptiness that surrounded me, I forced my heavy eyelids open, the afternoon glow blinding. I blinked a few times, vision clearing, and ran my hand over the dent in the sheets beside me, one that was created by the person lying there just seconds before.

I winced as my mind seemed to split, the taste of alcohol sour on my tongue and even more bitter in my head. Massaging my temples, I rolled over onto my back, the sheets rustling and smoothing out the person-shaped dent that was beside me.

Things were hazy in my head, but once the headache began to dull, I could remember things clearly. Blonde hair, brown at the roots with matching brown eyes, a smattering of freckles across flushed skin. The taste of alcohol on his mouth, salt on his skin. A drunken giggle, a pleasured moan.

Wesley.

"Well, fuck," I muttered, rubbing my eyes until white spots formed. Many thoughts fluttered in my head, rattling around with a loud clang. *I slept with a guy last night . Okay.* The idea sat in my head, clear and new, but not out

of place. The idea wasn't shocking, but more like a feeling of understanding, since deep down I knew that my attraction didn't run only towards girls. Curiosity sated, I suppose.

The idea - of being attracted to boys - had been dancing around my brain for a while now, but I had never acted on it, never finding someone to act on it with. The girl that was grinding on my lap at the party was monotonous, and now I could barely even remember her face. I was going to go through the motions, but then he just... stumbled into my lap, all wonky smiles and unfiltered words.

I recalled the first thought that slid into my head when I caught him in my arms as he tripped, brown eyes staring up at me, reflecting my face in their gaze.

It'll be fine if it's him.

And it was fine. More than fine, in fact.

And that was terrifying.

Part II

"About time you dragged your butt out of bed, mister," Bell chastised, wiggling her finger at me as I entered the kitchen. Smiling at her feigned harshness, I planted a brief kiss to the crown her head, mumbling a croaky 'good morning'. My grandmother sighed at the state of my voice, thrusting a glass of water into my palm before gesturing to the counter behind her.

" *Lunch* , for you," she said, making me grin. "Don't smile at me like that. You shouldn't be proud about waking up in the afternoon!"

"Yeah, yeah," I said, plopping myself down to shovel some eggs into my mouth, stomach gurgling with hunger.

"Don't ' *yeah, yeah* ' me, Nicolas," Bell scolded again, though her smile betrayed her tough tone, wrinkled hand moving to stroke my hair. Soon enough, a playful smile arranged itself on her face, blue eyes gleaming.

"So, you had company this morning," Bell said, making me swallow hastily, suppressing a cough with a mouthful of water. "Oh, you almost choked. That's rare."

" *Grandma* ," I said, rolling my eyes as Bell chuckled, leaning across the counter.

"You never have guests over, let alone someone who, well, slept over," Bell said, voice amused. "Who was he? A friend?"

I snorted at my grandmother's words, turning them over in my head as I chewed absent-mindedly.

Calling the boy a friend was a far stretch, the fact that we slept together doing nothing to actual foster any sort of relationship with him. We had barely talked, most of it blurred by drink anyway, and I barely knew anything about him. All I knew was his name, and that he was known for being one of the smartest - if not *the* smartest - in his year. When I had seen him in the halls before, he always had a serious expression on his face,

brow always crinkled and books tucked against his chest. The only time I saw him break that expression was that day last year, and when he was writhing beneath me last night. And that was all I knew about him, the boy who ran out of my room so fast I barely had time to open my eyes.

So, right now, he was nothing more than...

"An acquaintance," I said vaguely, Bell raising an eyebrow. "He's just someone I met at a party, and he was kind of gone and didn't tell me where he lived, so I took him back here."

"Is that right?" Bell said, clearly unimpressed by my answer.

"Mhmm."

"Well, from what I saw of his back when he ran out, he seemed like a nice boy," Bell said, eyes searching mine for *something.* I wasn't sure if she found something, because she just smiled, patting my back before speaking again.

"Oh, I think your ' *acquaintance* ' dropped one of his socks, by the way. You should return it to him," she said, pointing to a sock that had fallen on the floor by the kitchen arch way. Colourful dinosaurs lined the material, and I couldn't help but laugh at the print. For someone who usually seemed so rigid, the loud print was adorable and surprising.

He was surprising.

Part III

I didn't think it would be like this.

It wasn't supposed to be like this.

There must be something wrong with me.

My head throbbed as I tried to shake out the thoughts that invaded my senses. I had been with countless people before - all of them girls, to be fair - something that I was neither proud nor ashamed of. Isaac always gloated about his 'body count', something that made me roll my eyes every time he mentioned it, eyes challenging as if he was trying to one-up me in that department. I didn't care; he could sleep with whoever he wanted to sleep with, and the same went for me. I didn't sleep with people to bump up my numbers, but I didn't sleep with people because I loved them.

Maybe not even because I *liked* them.

It has always just been about sex, about feeling good, about making them feel good. Sex has always been good, but it has never been like *this* .

It wasn't that he was always in my head. Sure, he popped into it more often than not, but he wasn't a constant buzz at the back of my mind, like a mosquito that was dead set on sucking the life out of you. What was unsettling was *when* he was popping into my head.

Since that night, I had been approached by people, as I have always been. Pretty girls with pretty words, all of their faces blending in to the next. We would kiss, and it would be the same as any other time. Nice, familiar. It would be then, when I would place my hands on their bodies and they would sigh into my mouth, that I would think of *him.*

Her body's too soft, softer than his.

Her voice is too high, higher than his.

Her perfume is too strong, unlike his shampoo.

She isn't him.

Grimacing at the words in my head, I leaned against the metal fencing, pressing a cigarette between my lips and lighting it swiftly.

It's probably because he's a guy. It's exciting, and new, so of course I'd be thinking about it.

Of course.

Taking a lengthy drag of my cigarette, the familiar burn comforting, I exhaled a plume of smoke as I tapped my feet impatiently on the concrete just outside the school gates. Glancing at the rusted 'No Smoking' sign, I huffed a laugh as I took another drag, before crushing the cigarette beneath my feet and heading towards the school.

After a late night working, I was tired, but attendance was tracked and I had to at least try. If anything, I could at least nap in class, as long as no one interrupted me.

When I entered the halls, students glancing at me inconspicuously while stepping out of my path, I bit back an irritated sigh when a girl sauntered up to me, bottom lip trapped between her teeth.

"Hi, Nico," the girl giggled, brown eyes looking at me with clear intent.

Her eyes are lighter than his.

Forcing a smile on my face and the thought out of my head, I murmured a disinterested sigh, the girl grinning as she stepped closer to me. She leaned down slightly, most likely to give me a good view down her school shirt, lashes fluttering.

'Don't think about him,' I whispered to myself, ignoring the fact that the thought contradicted its intent. Looking at the girl, who was pretty but a little too eager, I let her mould herself to my body.

Leaning against the lockers, I didn't stop her when she crept up to her toes, pressing her lacquered lips to mine, tasting like artificial berries. I let her hands roam down my body, revelling in her satisfied giggle as I nipped at her neck, her body keening into me wantonly.

"Nico, let's go somewhere else..." the girl murmured, eyes looking around the crowded halls as if she were shy, the smug gleam in her eye telling me otherwise.

Looking up, about to nod, I found myself frozen as I met a pair of brown eyes, darker than hers. A jolt slammed through me, from my head to my toes, and I didn't think before detaching myself from the girl in front of me.

Wesley stared at me, a tormented expression on his face. I was suddenly very aware of my creased brow and tense face, and I wondered if I looked like how he was looking at me now.

The girl in front of me said something that I didn't catch, and that seemed to happen often these days. My mind was elsewhere, always elsewhere.

Because it has never been like this.

Part IV

I struggled to hold back my laugh when I saw his expression. For someone whose words were cloaked in lies, his face was endearingly honest. Every little change in his mood showed on his face, and right now he was screaming at me. His slightly widened eyes, tightly closed lips and tensed shoulders shouted ' *Don't you dare take that seat* '.

So of course, I did.

His face shifted the moment I lowered myself into the seat beside him, his throat bobbing as he swallowed loudly. I could feel the smile playing on my lips as I let my eyes close, the classroom quiet and the sun softly shining through the windows. We sat quietly for a brief moment, until Wesley cleared his throat, soft voice floating to my ears that, surprisingly, weren't annoyed at the disruption of silence.

His voice is nice.

Frowning at the thought, I forced myself to not open my eyes, to not stare at him.

"What?" I asked roughly, sensing the boy bristle next to me.

"Nothing," he replied, the silence returning.

It wasn't long before the hairs on my neck pricked upwards, the feeling of eyes on me heavy and distracting. With no one else in the room, it was clear that Wesley was staring at me. Indulging him in his naivety for a few seconds, I spoke again, tone a little lighter, teasing.

"Like what you see?"

Cracking open an eye, I swallowed back another laugh as Wesley let out a startled noise, his chair rattling as he jumped. While I could hold back the chuckle that tickled my tongue, I couldn't hold back the quirk of my lips as the boy's cheeks grew bright red, reaching all the way to his ears.

He's fun to tease.

Teasing the boy a bit more, his face getting redder and redder despite his best efforts to look calm and composed, Wesley then dropped his gaze to his books, fingers stroking the binding as he bit on his lower lip nervously.

"The other day... Or night I guess... Did we... you know..." he spoke, voice tentative, unsure.

I blinked once. Twice. Three times.

Did he not remember?

A strange feeling grew in my gut, uncomfortable and foreign. I swallowed and it was like forcing rocks down my throat, my eyes searching his face that was trained on the desk in front of him.

He really doesn't remember?

The unfamiliar feeling in my stomach grew, and I let out a small snort, wry smile on my face.

"Fuck?" I dropped, Wesley's eyes twitching. "Yeah, pretty sure we did."

"Oh."

The boy beside me seemed to deflate, a complicated expression on his face.

What does that mean?

No one has reacted like this before. He doesn't remember it, and he doesn't seem to want to mention it.

Did it not mean anything to him?

"Relax, it didn't mean anything," I said, stilling my breath. "I was curious, and drunk. And you were... well... *more* drunk." I ignored the way the words tasted foul, continuing anyway. "Just forget about it." *Don't* . "And

don't go telling other people about it either. I'm not usually into people like you."

Because it has never been like this.

The moment my words left my mouth, settling in the boy's ears, a smile graced his lips as his body sat up straighter, revived.

"Oh, ok, *thank god* ," he said, turning to me with an elated smile, one that caught the light of the sun drifting through the window, his brown eyes turning into molten bronze. "I'm not into people like you either."

His words echoed in my head, followed by a small pang in my chest.

What does that mean?

Part V

"Nervous?" I asked, exhaling a laugh when Wes's face drew tight.

"I'm fine," he said, voice strained, walking through the door to my bedroom. His movements were so stiff, I could almost hear his joints creaking. I watched him as he wandered in, eyes flickering here and there, and suddenly I was awash with a sense of nervousness.

I rarely had people in my room, not someone who was fond of sharing bits of myself to people. Colin has come over a few times, and Isaac barraged his way in maybe once or twice, but that was about it. Now, seeing Wes look at everything with those brown eyes of his, I didn't know what to do with myself. I felt more naked than I did that night we slept together.

Lost in my thoughts, I didn't notice it when Wes suddenly turned. We were standing too close, closer than both of us seemed to realised, his elegantly curved nose bumping into me. The smell of his shampoo, crisp and fresh, tickled my nose for a second - a second too short - before he tore himself away from me.

Then he was falling, and I was too.

His back hit the mattress first, then my arms around him. His mouth was parted in surprise, but no sound came out of them as he stared up at me, unblinking. Something seemed to pass over his expression. Confusion. Recognition. Panic.

And then there there was a sharp sting on my cheek, my eyes wrenched from his as he punched me. Hard.

This fucking-

"Oh my fucking God," Wes gasped, eyes widening even further, something I hadn't thought possible. My jaw ached and anger and shock flared in my stomach, Wes's mouth rambling as he clambered off the bed, like a deer caught in the headlights. He was gone before I could say anything, leaving

me there in my bedroom alone with a bruising face and a feeling that I couldn't describe even if I tried to.

Part VI

"Have lunch with me," I dropped, heart squeezing.

"Together?" Wes asked, face scrunching up in disbelief, making me laugh slightly. But then, his face twisted a little in... abhorrence? "What? *Hell no* ."

"Why?" I asked, tilting my head to the side to study the boy that was so desperately trying to distance himself from me.

"Because I don't want to?" Wes said, looking at me like I was daft, though his eyes shifted to the side when I took a step closer. It made me smile.

"Aren't you hungry?" I asked, taking another step towards him, his own foot shuffling backwards.

Interesting.

Before I could step forward, Wes spoke, saying that he wasn't hungry. A split second later, his stomach rolled and rumbled, my smile widening until my cheeks hurt, fingers itching to reach out and just-

Laughing softly, I grabbed the boy's wrist, a little skinny and bony. I would feed him, and feed him well.

Pushing him towards the kitchen counter, almost hoisting him onto a stool, I made myself busy cooking something I knew tasted good. Considering I had bought the ingredients yesterday for this exact purpose, I made a point of looking at him, asking him if he didn't eat anything.

Please be fine, please be fine, please be fine.

"I'm not picky," he said, shrugging a little. Nodding to hide my sigh of relief, I tried to control the odd way my hand was shaking as I cooked our meal. Even though I had made this multiple times before, my movements felt lighter, Wes's eyes heavy on my back.

He's finally looking at me.

I smiled at the thought, answering Wes's questions when he asked them, until I slid the bowl of pasta in front of him. He stared at it dubiously, and I couldn't help but laugh at his apprehension. I watched him carefully as he popped a forkful into his mouth, lips closing and sliding over the utensil which emerged clean and slick.

"It's good," Wes said, the words registering a little late, my attention spent on the way his mouth moved, soft and supple.

I want to kiss him.

Wes spoke again, and I answered him with half a mind. He continued to eat, and talk, and I continued to watch. When he was done eating, he began to stand, moving away from me. Too far away.

"I'll do the dishes," he said, pink lips shining with saliva moving again.

Fuck it.

Grabbing his wrist, still slender and hard, I pulled him closer and covered his mouth with mine. He gasped, and I licked. Then he moaned, and I melted.

Yeah, fuck it.

Part VII

"You can't afford to be so slack," Principal Myers grumbled, arms crossed over his stocky chest as he glared at me from across the desk. "You're already repeating the year, yet you're barely making the minimum attendance."

Rolling my eyes at the words I had heard a hundred times before, my fingers itched for a cigarette. The man in front of me continued to spew out words I had no trouble ignoring, my mind only catching the ones I needed to hear.

"Alright, you're dismissed," the man said, waving me away with the flick of his wrist. Not having to be told twice, I left the office, the woman at the front desk casting me a cold look as she peered up at my tattoos. I smirked a little at the disgruntled expression on her face, fingers fishing for the cigarettes in my pocket. Popping one in my mouth the moment I was outside, inhaling deeply, my wound nerves loosened slightly.

It wasn't that I didn't want to do well in school - no one *actively* wants to do poorly. It's just that, in these dull walls and jail-like classes, I felt like there was nothing here for me.

At least, except for him.

I exhaled, smoke clouding my vision as I walked past the cafeteria, moving towards the back exit of the school to smoke in relative peace. In the near distance, I heard a familiar voice, sounding so bright. Laughing. Joking.

"You're sacrificing your precious pasta bake? For *me* ? Is the world ending?"

My body seemed to be tuned into the frequency of Wes's voice, my feet carrying me towards it. My mouth curled upwards when I saw him, face alight with mirth, fingers pushing up his glasses. It was then that I saw that

he wasn't alone. My steps faltered as the person with him - a girl - leaned forward. Close. Far too close.

"Shut up and eat it, Wes," she said, teasing. Wes's mouth opened, the girl giggling as she pushed her fork inside. Wes murmured something quietly, the girl's face breaking out into a wide smile. My throat felt tight, my stomach turning. I pried open my clenched jaw to suck a long, painful drag of my cigarette, trying to wash away the burning feeling inside my gut.

It was honestly like watching a horror movie in slow motion. The girl leaned forward, planting her lips on Wes's face, tongue flicking out.

This isn't right.

I blew out the smoke with force, frustration building. Wes's eyes seemed to widen, his head turning towards me. Brown met blue, and I grit my teeth, crushing the cigarette on the ground, imaging it was something else. Maybe someone else.

I called him, wanting to see his reaction, but most of all wanting him to *push that girl off him.* The call had the desired effect, his shoulders rolling and her hands dropping, letting me breathe. But then, he simply flipped his phone over, stormy expression on his face.

I've never felt like this before.

It's not supposed to be like this.

Nico - 1:02pm
Behind the pool
Now.

Wes flinched, and I knew he would read the message. He had to. I was sure of it. Turning on my heel, I walked towards the secluded pool shed, and waited.

I waited.

And waited.

And then, he was here.

He stepped into my threshold, and I grabbed onto him. His body was so easy to lower onto the ground, his limbs compliant and his mouth opened in shock, so easy for me to claim. Our mouths fitted together, tongues rolling, and he groaned. His mouth tasted like pasta that wasn't mine, and I hated it.

I really fucking hated it.

Hissing as his glasses prevented me from getting closer, I pulled them from his face, head tilting to the side to slot our lips together. His hands pressed against my chest, neither pulling nor pushing, another guttural sound leaving his bruised mouth.

I kissed him until I couldn't taste her pasta any more. Until all I could taste was *him.*

Part VIII

Wesley Dillon - 1:30am
I finished our project
Not going to urs on Saturday
I'll submit it on Monday
Dont worry, ur name is on it

Letting out a short laugh, I rolled over in my bed, propping myself up with a pillow. Arriving home from work, I was on the verge of being asleep on my feet, body drained and eyes bleary. It was late in the night - or very early in the morning, depending on how you looked at it - but Wesley's name popping up on my phone had pushed away the exhaustion.

I could hear his voice in his words, softly timid but biting when he wanted it to be. I could imagine him sitting on his bed, face scrunched up in annoyance against the glow of his laptop, slender fingers angrily tapping on his phone. It's his myriad of facial expressions that made him so interesting to look at, and so fun to tease. The twitches in his brow, pursing of his soft lips and warm glare in his eyes only made me want to pull out more and more from him.

The words I wanted to say came easily, a message send a few minutes after receiving Wes's.

Nico Beckett - 1:32am
Saturday's not a study date then
It's just a date

I wondered how long he would take to respond, what noise would escape from his mouth when he read my message, which did nothing to hide its true implications. I wasn't left waiting, since the boy replied almost straight away. His hastiness made my heart clench, a giddy sense of excitement building inside my core.

Wesley Dillon - 1:32am
Hell. No
Nope
No
No way in hell
Fuck you

A snort left my lips when I read Wes's message. He really was making this too easy for me.

Nico Beckett - 1:32am
You already did

Snickering at my message, a sense of longing washed over my body. I wanted to see him, to see his expression, hear his scandalised gasp. Maybe feel him lash out to his my arm in embarrassment, as it's something he would probably do.

His next message thoroughly dulled the happy buzz I had in my veins, snuffing it out completely.

Wesley Dillon - 1:33am
Forget about it
All of it
I don't want anything to do with you
Our project is done
So leave me alone

"Forget about it?" I scoffed, eyes narrowing. Mouth suddenly dry, I swallowed, the taste bitter. He was pushing me away, always pushing. For the first time in my life I was the one running after someone, chasing after him dedicatedly, almost desperately. He was always just in front of me, my finger tips brushing his back, the ends of his hair. When my skin would brush against his, however, he would take two steps forward, just slipping out of my reach.

I just wanted him to, just once, take three steps towards me. Because I couldn't forget it, no matter how hard I had tried to. I couldn't forget the

way he felt, the way he melted against my hands. I couldn't forget how he cried out my name, voice rough yet so, so soft. I couldn't forget the way his brows bunched together when he was mad, or how his eyes crinkled when he smiled. I couldn't forget it, I couldn't forget any of it.

So I told him. Just one message, just one sentence. In four words, I laid my heart bare.

Nico Beckett - 1:35am
I can't forget it

I knew he had read it, something in my gut told me that he had seen it. Whether he would accept it was a whole different game, something I couldn't foresee. This predictably unpredictable boy, whose mouth said one thing and his body another, left me in a constant state of chaos.

I could feel him running again, two steps forward.

I had to pull him back, back to me. Back to us.

I steeled my nerves, calling Wes with determination. The phone rang and rang, Wesley's grumpy profile picture lit up on my screen. He didn't answer.

Two steps forward.

Nico Beckett - 1:43am
Really?
I know ur not asleep, Wes
Pick up the damn phone

Ringing him again, I released the breath I didn't realise I was holding, phone pressed tightly against my ear. Wes seemed to exhale as well, the sound so close to me ear, making me smile again.

"Took your time," I said, voice teasing. Wes huffed, and I swear I could feel his breath brushing against my ear lobe.

"What do you want, Nico?"

You.

"A date," I replied, swallowing my words and my heart.

Wes paused, before sighing. He didn't believe me, or he didn't *want* to believe me. This stupid, ridiculous boy, I had to make him believe me. Maybe I was pushing too hard, but I didn't know what else to do. I've never had to do this, never *wanted* to do this. Because it's never been like this.

"I want to kiss you," I said, voice slow. Sure. I had honestly never been so sure of anything in my whole fucking life. Never been so fucking honest.

"Me too," Wes whispered, words a clap of thunder. I blinked, heart alight with the glow on my phone. This boy's words flipped something in me, something I couldn't turn back from. Something new, something exciting, but something absolutely terrifying.

There was so much I wanted to tell him, but I knew he would run. So instead, I said something else, masking my heart with words.

"Good night, Wes."

Part IX

Even when he was so far away, I could see him in everything. When I'd cook, I'd think of him and the unabashed smile he had when he tasted my food. When Colin came to work with beans in his lunch, I found myself smiling like a complete fool. When I would move to light a cigarette, but stopping when I remembered how much he hates them. And when I was lying in bed alone in quiet darkness, I could only think of him.

It was ridiculous.

There wasn't a precise stimulus that made me realise that I loved him. It was beyond Wes to make me fall for him with a single grand gesture, no bouquet of roses or candle lit dinners to make me swoon. To be honest, he would probably rather die than do any of these things, but that was alright, because that was just how he was.

No, it wasn't a grand gesture that made me realise I had fallen in love with the dense, prickly boy. It was the little things; the late night talks, with the sound of the waves I couldn't see rolling in the background. It was the way he yawned through the receiver but didn't want to say good night. It was how his voice dripped with worry when I drove as I talked to him, his chastising timbre when he scolded me for that very same thing. It was how he cared while trying to make it seem like he didn't.

There had been many people who told me they cared about me. That they liked me, that they loved me. It was bloody ridiculous that I would fall for the one who adamantly told me that he didn't.

Wes was a fucking idiot, but I was an even bigger one to have fallen for him.

My thoughts were interrupted when a large hand slapped itself against the back of my head, Colin's shit-eating grin appearing in front of me. Rolling my eyes, back of my head stinging, I ignored his amused expression by

rolling my body beneath the body of the car we were working on, senses bombarded by the smell of oil and metal.

"Heh, thinking about the person who's 'ridiculously adorable when they blush'?" Colin asked, his bulky form bending down to peer beneath the car, thick brows wriggling like twin worms. Colin's long-winded code name for Wes made me snort, but I didn't deny his words. At my silent response, Colin whistled, the corners of his mouth pulling up even higher.

"You've been zoning out more than I have lately," Colin said, chuckling. "Shelly said that if you don't get your shit together, she'll force you to clean the garage on your day off."

"Yeah, sure," I said, eyes rolling. I knew that Colin was only joking, considering Shelly was, undoubtedly, the most invested party in my relationship with Wes. Or, almost relationship, I guess. She never had a problem with me drifting off, her excited squeal always pulling me from my thoughts.

'Oh, you're thinking about him, aren't you!' she would always yell, nodding emphatically. *'Can't we meet him? You tell me about him all the time, but we don't even know who he is! Come on, Nico!'*

Shaking my head, smile on my face, I fiddled with the wrench in my hands. Colin, not seeming to want to drop the topic, lowered himself to sit on the ground beside my outstretched legs.

"Have I met him before?" Colin asked, head cocked to the side. I shrugged, not sure of the answer.

"Maybe. He's from our school," I replied, Colin raising a brow.

"He's not that theatre kid, is he? You know, the tall, lanky one with the electrocuted hair?" Colin asked curiously, a wild laugh tearing itself from my chest.

"No, he's definitely not," I said, wheezing. "Why would you think that?"

"Isaac told me he saw the guy drooling at you once," Colin shrugged, face passive.

"That all he said?" I asked, already knowing the answer. Colin shrugged again, leaning back on his palms.

"Not really. Didn't hear anything else about it afterwards, though," Colin said, making me sigh.

"He'd probably have a lot more to say if he found out about me and, you know," I said flatly, Colin clicking his tongue in agreement.

"You're not going to tell him about it?" Colin asked, and I shook my head. Isaac and I had been friends for what seemed like an eternity, and I knew the kind of person he was. He was fun to hang out with, as long as you didn't piss him off, and was exceedingly generous with his friends. If someone looked at you wrong, or slighted you even in the most minuscule of ways, he'd be there at your back. He was hot-headed and full of testosterone, sometimes saying and doing things that were a bit too much, but he has never caused any problems for me. At this point, we'd been friends for so long, that it was easier to just go with the flow.

"Not worth the trouble," I said, pulling myself out from under the car, Colin giving me a long stare, before breaking out into a massive grin, his default expression.

"Then tell me all about it," Colin said, snickering. "About this boy that has you whipped as all fuck."

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The night was going slowly, so achingly slowly, and I was bored. Although tired from work, I was unable to nap or fall asleep, body rolling around on my plush couch. It was around this time that I would usually be with Wes, the two of us lazing around, kissing, flirting, arguing. When he was here, time went by too quickly, but when he wasn't, it seemed to drag on relentlessly. I never thought I would be that sappy person who, without
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irony, believed that the clock merely ticked down the time I would have to wait until I saw him next.

It was when I was about to message Wes, fingers hovering over the contact I had so often dialled over the past few days, that the door bell rang. Bell had only just left maybe five minutes ago to visit her friend, and it was likely that she forgot something and came back for it.

Walking to the door, fingers on the handle and expecting to see my grey-haired, round-cheeked grandmother in front of me, I almost stumbled when I saw who was there.

"Wes?" I asked, the boy's eyes turned up at me, pupils wide and irises so very, very dark. His curly hair was pushed back from his face, wind-tousled and wild. Brown eyes were glimmering, his cheeks red and his lips slightly parted as he panted, chest rising and falling with labour. He looked like he had been running, or at least walking very, very fast. He closed his mouth slowly, my eyes catching his every tremor, and then swallowed. His eyes shifted, as did his body, taking two steps forward.

Clumsy hands clasped onto the front of my shirt, fabric crumpling, and his mouth pressed against mine, hard and desperate.

My body froze, his so very, very hot and pressed up against me. He was here, he was here. He ran here, all the way to me.

A groan left my lips as I crushed Wes to me, hands touching everywhere and yet not enough. It would never be enough. Running after him all those times was worth it, for this one time that he ran to me, was everything.

Part X

I couldn't sleep, at least, not restfully. The night had dragged on, my mind unable to stop replaying what happened at the bowling alley over and over. I could see it so clearly now, but in the moment, everything was blurred. I watched as Issac sauntered forward, his familiar smirk dancing across his features. I saw Wes's sister's face twist in disgust, and Wes's body stiffen, hand flying to his sister's back. His brown eyes, usually so warm and vibrant, were stretched wide and so, so scared.

My friends were snickering around us as Isaac's mouth opened, some of them nudging me in the side in amusement, but I couldn't respond. Hell, I couldn't even move.

I looked around at my friends, who were all looking on with only mild interest, making some snide comments about how Isaac's flirtation wasn't seeming to get across to the pretty brunette in his sights. They were used to seeing Isaac like this and barely batted an eyelash, merely leaning back like they were watching a rerun of a movie they had seen a thousand times. I realised that maybe, if it wasn't Wes there, if that wasn't his sister, I would be the same.

I don't want you to see me like this.

Isaac's mouth moved again, but I couldn't hear what he was saying, my ears ringing silence. When Isaac's mouth closed again, I saw Wes's face grow pale, his eyes flicking towards me for a brief moment before turning to his sister. I stepped forward when I saw Wes's hand trembling as it grabbed onto his sister's. My movement made some of my friend's heads whip towards me, heads tilted and eyes questioning, burning into my skull, rooting me in place. My feet were like lead, my ankles tethered with the chains held in the hands of my friends.

Isaac spoke, his words finally registering in my frazzled mind, and I saw Wes flinch when Isaac called his sister a bitch. Isaac's muscular arm

reached forward, and so did my body. The chains around my ankles rattled as my body sluggishly stepped forward, heavy.

Suddenly, Wes's own body moved, pulling his sister's behind him.

No, no, no. Don't do it, babe.

"Don't touch my sister, you asshole!" Wes shouted, but with his smaller stature, thinner frame and shaky voice, he wasn't imposing in the slightest. Isaac's eyes flashed, his mouth curling sinisterly. Even though he was smiling, I knew that when he smiled like *that* , he was not happy.

"Oh, *sister* ," Isaac drawled, brow raised. "What, do you two have some weird thing going on? You keen on your sister or something, fucking psycho." My stomach turned, my body taking another step forward, legs wading through tar. Wes's hands shook again as he spread them out in an attempt to separate his sister from Isaac, and I saw him swallow before narrowing his eyes, brown turning to steel.

No, don't provoke him, please, babe.

"I'm not keen on my own sister, you prick. And frankly, she's even *less* into you," Wes said, venom in his usually dulcet tenor. There was a loud crash, and I watched as everything moved in slow motion. Wes's pained cry rattled against my ear drums, his body crumpling to the ground. The chains around my ankles snapped, the tar melting as my body flared, seeing red.

Groaning at the memory, I got up from my bed to open the window, giving up on sleep for the rest of the morning. It was still dark outside and everything was silent, leaving me only with the loud sounds of my thoughts.

I fucked up, I really fucked up. I was useless, I froze at the one time where I shouldn't have frozen. I hated it, I hated myself. Why didn't I just *move* , stop Isaac from saying those things. Why didn't I step in front of Wes, to shield him and protect him from my own friend.

My friend.

Guilt and fear welled up inside me, and my throat scratched for a cigarette. I didn't hesitate to light one up, pressing it between my lips and letting the soothing warmth flood my lungs. I had been smoking less lately, especially around Wes. I could see how much he hated it, how he didn't hesitate to complain about it the smell or the taste of it on my tongue. I could also see how his eyebrows would bunch together when he told me that I was going to get cancer, and how they smoothened out when I crushed them against the ground. I could see so clearly how his face would light up when I would stop, and it made me want to do it more.

'You're not the person that she was describing you as.'

The words he had told me in the pool shed the other day made me laugh dryly, throat sore as the cigarette smoke burned. In that moment, I had felt so light. I liked the way Wes looked at me; exasperated at times, but always so warm, and so penetrating. He saw me, *really* saw me, and he accepted it. I wanted him to always look at me like that, like I was worthy.

But now, would his eyes change? After seeing that unsightly part of me, would he even want to look at me? Did I deserve for him to look at me?

Drowning in my thoughts, I only realised that the cigarette I was inhaling was nearing its end when the glowing heat of the tip was tickling my fingers. That cigarette was discarded for another. And another.

And another.

It was only when the rest of the world woke up, filling the air with sounds, that I could finally smother the thoughts inside my head. Glancing at the clock and seeing the time, I knew what I had to do. Cigarette between my lips, I lethargically got changed. I probably looked like a mess, eyes tired and skin dry, but I had to go.

I had to go to him.

It seems that I was early, but early was alright. My body was tensed with nerves as I waited outside my boy's house. I had to see him, to see that he's

okay. Even... Even if he didn't want to see me, even if he saw me how everyone else saw me, I had to see him.

The front door opened, and the smoke I had just inhaled swirled in my mouth, suddenly suffocating. Wes hobbled out with his head trained on the ground, slender body leaning on a set of crutches, foot wrapped in white. My heart cracked at the sight of him, the cigarette dropping from my fingers.

When he looked up, his eyes widened a fraction, before softening. And he was looking at me. Really looking at me, like nothing had changed.

Like I hadn't changed.

My mouth curled involuntarily, foot pivoting on top of the discarded cigarette that I knew Wes hated. My hands that usually itched for a cigarette reached outwards, desperate to hold onto Wes instead. Wes asked me why I was here, but the answer was trapped in my throat. All I could think about was holding him, and never letting him go.

"H-Hey, we're outside, Nico," Wes murmured, voice hushed. I laughed, almost incredulously, as he said my name, his hands against my chest.

"Mm. Just for a second. Please," I whispered, not wanting to let him go. I didn't want to risk him running away, not again. Not when I think I finally had him.

I knew I had to release him some time, his body fidgeting in my grasp, but I was reluctant. Managing to peel myself away from him, the two of us climbed into the car and headed towards school. My left foot tapped against the floor mat of my car as I drove, my nerves still heightened, my hands tightening on the steering wheel every time I saw Wes glance at me in my periphery, clearly wanting to say something.

Oh God, is this it? Is he going to tell me that after this, he doesn't want anything to do with me?

It was when we were at a red light that he finally spoke, voice quiet and hesitant. "Are you mad about something?" My hands flexed, and Wes opened his mouth hastily, hands balling into fists in his lap. "U-Um... if it's because I complained about the smoking, I don't mind if you do it with the windows open. Kind of."

Oh God, this boy, I swear. This sweet, dense, loveable boy.

I let out a sigh, wondering why he thought that he was the problem, when I was the one that fucked up. I didn't deserve it, but he was still so fucking warm.

Fuck, I love him.

My hand tightened around the steering wheel again at the thought, wanting nothing more than to embrace him again. Pulling over, I couldn't stop myself as I leaned towards him, arms softly closing around him. I held him loosely, preciously, breathing in the smell of him to confirm that he was really here.

"Nico...?" Wes asked, voice tinged with confusion.

"I'm sorry. For letting my friends do that to you, and your sister," I said slowly, pulling back only to look at his bandaged ankle, my heart crumbling a little more. My eyes only left it when Wes let out a breathy laugh, fingers gently nudging my chin to look at him. He had a small smile on his lips, eyes gentle.

"It looks worse than it is, really," Wes assured me, thumb on my chin rubbing against my skin. "It's already a lot better, it shouldn't be long until I'm out of the bandages."

Lies. This boy, starting to lie again to make me feel better, the thought making my heart flutter.

"I'm really sorry, Wes," I repeated, pulling Wes closer. "I shouldn't have let Isaac-"

"Nico, you really don't have to apologise. You didn't do anything wrong," Wes said, voice firm, sure.

But I did, and you just don't see it. You're too sweet to see it, and I'm too weak to change that, because I don't want you to see me like that.

"I was kind of worried that you'd... think less of me. After seeing... that," I said, voice cracking. Wes's eyes widened as they took mine in, and I had to look away. Wes sighed, breath tickling my cheek, the same skin soon being covered by the palm of his hand.

"Nico," he said, guiding my had to look at him. He eyes held a smile, his lips salvation. "I could never think less of you. Only more, if that's even possible."

I was left speechless at his simple words, overwhelmed not quite doing my emotions justice. There were only three words that I wanted to say, but they weren't right for this moment. Not yet, not just yet.

So I turned my 'I love you' into a 'Thank you', my heart hoping that the kiss I pressed against him didn't give me away.

Part XI

Wes looked up at me, almost pouting, and I caved. Chuckling at his blatant " *please kiss me* " face, I indulged him and pressed my lips to his, only breaking it when my smile could no longer contain itself. Little by little, Wes had slowly let himself relax into my touch, no longer shying away from it like he had done in the past, and the thought warmed me to the core.

Sighing against my lips, Wes gave me a thoughtful glance, arms slipping over my shoulders. "You're right. Maybe a little spicy." The double entendre didn't escape either of us, our talk about pasta sauce a surface cover for a meaning far more obscene.

"Still tasty though?" I asked, my suggestive tone teasing out a playful shoulder hit from Wes, the boy rolling his eyes as he reached behind him to grab a bag of salt, opening it before waving it in the space between our bodies.

"It does need a little more salt, though," he said, making me nod, smiling at Wes softly.

"Mhmm. I thought so too, babe."

There was a thud, and my eyes followed the noise to the ground between our feet. Salt spilled form the dropped bag, and I snapped my head back to Wes, who was staring at me wide-eyed, mouth parted in a startled 'O'.

" *What* ?"

My heart hammered when I heard his small, strained voice, sounding so pained that it made me hurt. I fumbled to grab his hands, flipping them over and around, trying to find the source of his pain. Hands inching up, inspecting the planes of his body, I hurriedly tried to figure out what was wrong, because from the look on his face, there was something clearly very, very wrong.

"Wes, what's wrong, are you feeling sick? Did you eat something weird at Benny's?" I asked, words rushed as I pressed my hand against the soft expanse of his stomach, which tensed immediately.

"N-No," Wes stammered, shaking his head weakly, eyes flitting here and there and everywhere, but not meeting mine. "I'm not feeling... not feeling sick... But you just..."

Me...?

Dread seized me, and countless scenarios flew through my mind. My mind picked over everything I've done, trying to pull out what could have made Wes reel like this.

Did I fuck up?

Did I fuck this whole thing up?

No.

I opened my mouth to say something, to make him *come back to me*. But he spoke first, words quiet and panicked, voice cracking.

"You... You called me... B-babe."

My mind was blank, my heart that was lodged in my throat sinking back down, thumping in my ribcage. Wes's lower lip wavered, face pale, and I couldn't hold it in, not when he was looking at me like that because of a single innocuous word.

Babe.

It had slipped out of my mouth without a thought, so natural and right that I didn't think twice about it. It was a word that had only floated around in my thoughts, my mind's voice whispering it every time I looked at the boy in front of me. It was just a word, but the single sound seemed to knock the wind out of him.

A relieved, hysterical laugh erupted from my lungs, and I pulled Wes close, as close as I could, pressing my face into his shoulder.

I love him. I really fucking love this bloody idiot.

Part XII

I smoothed the hair falling across my boyfriend's sleeping face, which crinkled with his dream. Though asleep, his body still seemed taut, his tears only having freshly dried on his cheeks. He was so small, so vulnerable in my arms, making me want to hold him tighter and tighter until I absorbed all of his sadness into myself.

Seeing him now only reminded me of myself, all those years ago when my parents divorced. I was only around nine years old, not quite understanding what was happening around me. There wasn't much that I remembered from back then, but I could remember the yelling. I would wake up to the sharp sounds of ' *fuck you's* ' being slung back and forth, the occasional crash as fists were slammed on tables or objects were thrown. I could remember walking in, bleary eyed, and both of my parents turning to me, strained smiles on their faces.

"Nicolas," my mother cooed, bending down slightly with her arms outstretched, snake-like smile on her face. Sweet like poison. "Come here to your mama, hm? Let's go to the playground that you like, the one with the really big slide!"

"No, Nicolas," papa would say, gruff voice dripping with duplicitous affection. "Bud, come over here with me. You wanted to try out the new cars at work, right?"

"Work again?" mama scoffed, soft eyes hardening as she turned towards the taller man, lips pulling back in a snarl. "You already live there, and now you want to lock Nicolas there too?"

"You're fu- You're crazy," my father said, exhaling harshly. "And I was going to be civil, but I see that it's wasted on you. Do you think I would let you take Nicolas with you while you sleep with that cun-"

"Shut the fuck up, Harvey!" mama snapped, before her eyes widened, turning to me with that same sickening smile. Her pink lips were weeds

disguised as flowers. "Nicolas, Nicolas, my *baby. Why don't you go to your room and get changed, and then we can go, hm? Run along, now."*

I nodded, quickly walking back to my room, the sound of the screaming beginning before I even reached the door. I could head papa saying naughty words, and mama yelling back the same thing twice as loud. They were so, so loud.

Crawling onto my bed, I slid under my blankets and pillows, burying myself in my sheets. I pulled out the mp3 player I got for my 8th birthday, and stuck the headphones into my ears, turning on my music and closing my eyes.

Loud, it was still so, so loud.

I felt a familiar yet distant sensation as the ageing memories played behind my eyes, something I hadn't thought about for a long time. The bitterness had dulled over the years, with Bell doing her best to heal the damage her daughter and ex-son-in-law had inflicted on me. My wounds had healed, but not without scars.

Wes stirred in his sleep, his nose scrunching up as he mumbled something incomprehensible. Unconscious and troubled, his smaller body wriggled closer to me, his arms holding onto mine like a lifeline, face pressing into my chest.

"It's okay," I whispered, my boy not waking up, but his body relaxing again, melting my arms. My heart bled at the sight of him, my throat growing tight. "I've got you, Wes. I've got you."

My words disappeared into silence, the night punctuated only with the sounds of our breaths, which rose and fell in sync.

And it was quiet. So, so quiet. Just how it should be.

Part XIII

I had never felt like this before.

Nervous didn't seem to cut it as I looked at the pile of discarded clothes on my bed, an eyesore and blight on my spirits. I had never had trouble choosing clothes, often throwing on whatever was at hand and being satisfied with how it looked. But now, knowing that I was about to officially meet my boyfriend's family for the first time, everything I tried on suddenly made me either look like a wannabe scene kid circa 2005 or a complete jackass.

Knowing that Wes's sister wasn't my biggest fan, and that his mother was still wrapping her head around things, I didn't want to do anything to fan their flames of apprehension towards me. Looking down at my arms, the black ink staining them making my stomach flip for the first time in my life, I waded through the pile for two long-sleeved shirts.

They would probably prefer these shirts, unless they're too dressy. Ugh, they're either going to think I'm trying too hard or that I'm an accountant in training. Fuck me.

"Nicolas?" Bell called, tapping lightly on my door twice. Grumbling a stressed 'come in', I turned to my grandma with a lost expression as she stepped through the door. Her eyes flitted over my room, lingering on the mountain of clothes behind me, on the two contrasting shirts in my arms and then on my face, before letting out a snort.

"Well, I never thought I'd see the day," Bell chirped, laughing merrily as I rolled my eyes. "My Nicolas, getting nervous over a boy. Oh, I should take a picture!"

" *Grandma,* " I groaned, shaking my head as I threw the shirts on my hands onto the growing pile, moving to sit beside it.

" *Grandson*, " Bell replied, voice echoing my strained tone. Taking a seat next to me on the bed, the mattress rippling, the elderly woman pat my knee tenderly. "What's *really* worrying you, Nicolas? And don't say it's about the clothes, I know it's more than that."

My grandma moved her hands to clasp mine, calloused and wrinkled hands comforting despite their roughness. Her gentle action dislodged a sigh from my mouth, my shoulders heaving in a weighted shrug.

"I don't know," I said, thinking. "It's lots of things, but nothing. I'm just... worried that they won't like me."

"Oh, honey," Bell breathed, chuckling lightly. "Now, why would you think that?"

Why wouldn't I?

"Well, for starters, his sister thinks I'm a violent thug," I said, laughing wryly as Bell raised a silver eyebrow. "And, from what I've heard from Wes, his family are... conservative, about things. You know, about appearances." I gestured towards the tattoos lining my arms, Bell nodding thoughtfully.

"And that's why you're thinking about wearing those long-sleeved dress shirts that I've never seen you wear before, is it?" Bell said, head nodding at the shirts at the peak of the clothing mountain.

"Yeah, I guess so," I mumbled, shrugging again. Bell sighed, releasing my hands from hers only to pinch my cheek harshly, my body leaning away from hers with an expression of betrayal. "Ow, what was that for?!"

"For being stupid," Bell huffed, eyes rolling. "It's good to see that Wesley has humbled you. God knows your ego is the size of Jupiter." Bell snorted at her own comment, before turning her body to face me straight on, eyes serious. "But Nicolas, you're stupid to feel the need to... hide, or change yourself for someone else. Even if it's for Wesley or his parents." Blinking a few times, Bell cocked her head to the side curiously.

"Did Wesley say that you had to dress a certain way?" Bell asked, and I frowned. Thinking back to when Wes asked me to come over for dinner, all I could remember was the nervous smile on his face, and the relieved and excited smile that overtook it when I said I would come. All he told me was that I should prepare my stomach, but also not to expect much. Oh, and maybe to have a snack beforehand in case the food is inedible.

"He didn't," I said, Bell smiling softly at my response. "But I need to make a good impression on his fami-"

"If he never said anything, then why are you worrying. That boy seems like he worries about everything, I'm sure he would have warned you if his house had a strange dress code or something," Bell said, reaching across the bed to grab my phone, pressing it into my hands. "If you're worried, just ask him. I have a feeling that he couldn't care less about what you wear, as long as you show up on time. And it's already getting late, Nicolas."

"Oh, shit," I said, glancing at the time. Bell slapped the back of my head at my language, getting up with a groan and the creaking of bones. Moving to leave the room, I quickly grabbed my grandma's hand, pulling her into a brief hug.

"Thanks, gran," I said, the woman chuckling and patting me on the back, waving the thanks away.

"Yes, yes. Now hurry and call your boy. You should really get going, even though watching you flounder like this is quite entertaining."

"Grandma ."

Bell just snorted as she left my room, leaving me to call Wes and decide on something appropriate to wear.

It turned out that Bell was right, as always - Wes didn't give two damns about what I was wearing, because what I normally wore was enough.

I was enough.

Part XIV

I smiled as Wes's body leaned into mine, his back pressing against my chest as he tried to avoid being crushed by the crowd. I felt more than heard him sigh, and I could imagine the way his eyes would roll, following Benny's retreating back. He watched his best friend disappear into the throng of pulsating bodies, turning to me. Catching the end of his eye roll, I felt my smile widening as I took in the boy in front of me.

Dark eyes peered up at me, splashed with an array of colours under the flashing strobe lights, a little exasperation mixed in the amusement. His cheeks were flushed, like they always were, and his mouth was curved gently, closed lips looking impossibly soft, honestly just *asking* to be kissed. The smell of alcohol was thick around us, with a few notes of sweat mixed in, but with Wes pressed so close to me and his head hovering just under my nose, I could close my eyes and pretend that it was just the two of us, the smell of his shampoo taking my mind places.

He was beautiful, both that first night and now.

"What are you looking at me like that for?" Wes asked, voice teasing, but also curious.

Because you're beautiful, and you're *mine.*

Wes looked at me, waiting for an answer. Could he really not tell what I was thinking? How beautiful I find him, how abso-fucking-lutely gone I was for him? He had be wrapped around his finger, and he didn't even know it.

"Just thinking that I need to keep an eye on you," I replied, pulling him closer. Closer. There were too many people around, all of their eyes on us, on him. There were too many people looking at him, and that primal possessiveness inside me stirred. Though he couldn't read my thoughts, Wes definitely sensed the shift in the air between us, sucking in a tight breath, lashes fluttering.

"Why's that?" he asked softly, leaning his head against me, hands stroking the back of mine that hung across his body, fingers hot.

"Well, someone here has a track record of getting drunk at parties and sleeping with hot guys," I said, wiggling my brow to coax out a reaction from my boyfriend, who spluttered adorably, cheeks reddening further.

"I do *not* have a track record! It was just that one time, and... and it was with you!" Wes's hands pushed against my chest, making me laugh as he spun around, lip pushed out in a pout. My eyes dropped to his mouth, and the movement was not unnoticed, Wes's own flickering downwards, before he blinked twice.

"But wait. Did you really just call yourself 'hot'?"

"What, do you not agree?" I replied, swallowing my chuckle when Wes's hands slipped across my shoulders, blazing a trail of heated skin and goosebumps. Our noses bumped, both our lips slightly parted as we danced along the edge, seeing who would give in first.

I already knew it would be me, but not yet. *Not yet.*

"You're so fucking full of yourself," Wes huffed, though the words were full of adoration. We smiled, lips brushing slightly, teasingly.

God, this boy. Honestly.

"If not hot, then what? What kind of guys do you hook up with at parties then?" I asked, voice a little rough as I blatantly stared at Wes's parted lips, which were on the verge of moving with an answer. I was tempted to just shut him up then, head tilting to the side and leaning forward, but only barely. Wes's exhale hit my cheek, making me shiver. His lips moved with some words, enticing me, before his eyes lifted upwards, mouth curling mischievously. Then his eyes left me, looking over my shoulder.

"Yeah, I think I have a thing for guys like that one over there," he said, momentarily silenced by his words, but immediately afire when I took in

the dangerous gleam in Wes's eyes and the knowing grin on his mouth. That mouth that was so fucking tempting but also so fucking *rude* .

I kissed him then, hard and unbridled, giving in. Our lips moved together, tongues rolling, and a moan escaped Wes's parted mouth.

"You're such a fucking liar," I groaned, Wes actually having the audacity smirk, making me kiss him again, and again.

"Yeah, I am, but what are you going to do about it?"

I almost laughed out loud, my heart hammering in my chest, his words knocking the sense out of me.

Yeah, maybe he does know that he has me wrapped around his finger. But I didn't mind, because he was *mine* as much as I was his.

Part XV

"So let me make it up to you."

Wes didn't seem to grasp the meaning of my words immediately, watery eyes creasing a little further as he stared at me. My heart caved as his lower lip trembled, my thumbs rubbing across his tear-streaked cheeks which were flushed under the pad of my finger. I slid my hands down to cup his cheek, kissing his lips briefly, pulling back to look at his face. His eyes had widened a fraction, comprehension flashing in his eyes.

"Fuck, come here, babe," I murmured, hand sliding down further to loosely tug at the sides of his neck, which arched as he moved to meet my mouth half way. A relieved moan escaped Wes's throat as I coaxed his mouth open, my tongue flattening against his. His throat moved under my thumb, my anger mixing with my desire until I couldn't think straight..

My hands dropped down again to grip onto his hips roughly, my fingers digging into his skin enough to make Wes suck in a tight breath, his mouth ripping itself from mine with a slick snap. I grinned, rubbing the skin on his hip, fingers slipping under his clothing, pressing on the areas that were probably a little tender, considering the hitch in Wes's already laboured breathing.

"Okay?" I asked, thumb brushing over the soon-to-be-bruised skin, Wes's eyes glazing over as he nodded emphatically, slamming his mouth against mine again, harsher than he had ever before. *More* , his body was saying. *Screaming* . Our teeth clashed, my fingers ripping at the clothing covering Wes's body. Our lips parted again, but only for the brief second it took for me to pull his shirt over his head, mine following soon after. Glancing down, I chuckled when I saw a few red marks around Wes's hips, his fair skin easily marked. Our eyes met as I pointedly pressed my fingers onto the patterns I had mapped out before, Wes smothering his moan with my mouth.

My fingers gripped tightly onto him, not wanting to let go, I hissed when Wes reciprocated my vice-like grip, his own digits clawing at my back and shoulders. His nails left a heated blaze across my skin and it stung, but it wasn't painful. Quite the contrary - it was hot. So fucking hot.

"You're so fucking hot - *fuck* ," I cursed, Wes responding with a downward pull of his fingers that ended at the dip between my scapulas.

"Nico," Wes panted, letting out a sound that was halfway between a breath and a laugh. His mouth then closed over my lip ring, almost sucking on it, before I felt him smile against my mouth. Then, suddenly, his teeth closed down on my bottom lip. Hard.

This fucking boy-

"Oh, *fuck* ," I growled, pushing Wes harshly at his hips, his body falling onto his bed, body bouncing as the mattress creaked. I threw my body on top of him, his legs spreading instinctively as he pulled me down, as if he couldn't breathe without having my mouth on his. I only indulged him for a moment, before pulling back with a teasing smirk, Wes's glare only making my pants grow tighter.

"Spoiled brat," I chuckled, voice raw. Wes moved his arms to try and pull me down, but I clicked my tongue, pinning his wrists on either side of his head. Wes's glare only heated up as he twisted his arm in my grasp, my fingers tightening in response.

"Stingy bastard," Wes huffed, managing to roll his eyes before his arms went slack in mine. Raising a brow, I didn't relax my hold on his arms, not sure at what he was playing at. And oh, was he playing.

Arms pinned down, Wes had to resort to other body parts to grab my attention - not that he didn't have it in the first place, when he was there splayed out beneath me, lips red and swollen and already looking so undone. I didn't have time to prepare myself, mentally or physically, when Wes rolled his hips upwards, his clothed hard on rubbing against mine. My jaw clenched as my cock throbbed, already bucking forward to chase after

the friction Wes had provided, the both of us moaning in tandem as our hips collided again.

"We need to get these pants off," I muttered, growing irritated by the sheer amount of clothing we both had on, my words almost taking an air of offence. Wes blinked up at me, before snorting, the corners of his eyes crinkling as he laughed. The shift in his expression hit me in straight in the gut, my stomach twisting and my heart swelling.

How does he do it? How can he be so fucking hot but so fucking cute at the same time, he's not playing fair.

The momentary break in his hungry expression was over as quickly as it came, his smile disappearing when he bit his lip at the feeling of me pulling off his pants and underwear in one swift motion. Fabric rustled, before falling to the ground, leaving Wes bare apart from the marks I had painted on him.

But there weren't enough - there would never be enough.

"You're mine," I said, voice steady as I licked and nibbled at the sensitive skin on his neck, moving lower and lower, closing around a hardened nipple. My words and actions seemed to trigger something in Wes, his whole body shivering beneath me, his lower lip trapped between his teeth as he suppressed his strained voice.

"Mine," I said again, right beside his ear, and Wes's hips thrust upwards. Apparently the feeling of his bare and hard cock rubbing against me was too much, a choked noise leaving his throat, arms rebelling against my stern hold.

"Fuck, Nico, yes. Yes. I'm yours, I'm yours, *please* ," Wes gasped, head tilting backwards as he ground himself on my thigh. "Please let me touch you. Please, I-I need to touch you." Wes's voice was so desperate, so unashamed and so *honest* that I really had no choice.

"Only because you said please," I teased, letting go of his hands, only for him to hit me once against my shoulders in annoyance, before using them to

pull himself upwards. My empty hands sought his body, pulling him by the waist until he was straddling my lap. His erection bumped against his lower stomach, red and dribbling a little at the tip. I pressed my forehead against his after pressing a short and hard kiss to his open mouth. Breathing heavily, Wes whimpered as he rocked his hips back and forth, riding my thigh like he would die if he didn't.

Wes's cock was wet, his pre-cum dripping down its length and onto my jeans. My eyes didn't know where to look, wanting to take in Wes's euphoric face, his bare chest rising and falling as he desperately tried to breathe, or the dark and wet patch of fabric on my thigh that began to spread with every wet jerk of Wes's hips. Taking everything in, my own hard-on was getting so fucking painful in my pants, straining against the fabric.

"You're making a mess on my pants," I chuckled, voice hoarse and strained.

"Ngh," was all Wes managed to get out, peeling his eyes open as his hips stuttered. Looking at the dampness he had left on my leg, Wes's arms tightened around my neck.

"Take them off then," Wes breathed, hands dropping down to fiddle with my zip. Soon, my remaining clothes were thrown somewhere across the room. I didn't know where - my attention was rather preoccupied. Kissing Wes again, I spoke against his lips.

"Do you have condoms, babe?" I asked, Wes choking. His face was already pink with arousal, but the tips of his ears flushed with colour at my question, making me chuckle.

"Y-Yeah," Wes said, turning his eyes away, too shyly for someone who was grinding himself on me like his life depended on it just a second ago.

"Oh?" I responded, genuinely surprised that he had some. We had never had sex at his place before, and I knew that he didn't usually want to, not when his family could potentially hear everything that was going on. The thought clearly didn't cross his mind right now though, as it shouldn't. But the fact that he had condoms meant that he *had* thought about it at some point,

contemplating the idea enough to actually have gone out and bought condoms.

An image of Wes at the pharmacy standing in front of the condom section blitzed its way into the forefront of my mind. I could imagine his face, bright red and embarrassed, brown eyes glancing around him to make sure no one was watching him. I could imagine him looking at the different types, thinking about which ones he'd like, which ones I'd like, and maybe getting a little turned on at the thought before remembering where he was and turning even redder.

The thought shouldn't have turned me on, especially when I was already so fucking hard, but it did.

Fuck.

"Where are they, babe?" I asked, voice urgent. "And lube. Do you have lube?"

Wes only nodded, quickly gesturing towards the bottom bedside drawer. Detaching myself from him and jumping off the bed, I clumsily rummaged through his things, and as expected, an unopened box of condoms and plastic-wrapped bottle of lube were found shoved at the back of the drawer. Stepping around the side until I was standing at the foot of the bed, I couldn't get the condom on fast enough, and I only grew more frustrated by the ridiculous amount of plastic packaging covering the bottle of lube.

Wes, still reclined with his legs spread wide, seemed to share my frustration as he let out a long whine.

"Your plan really is to kill me, huh?" Wes said, and I would have laughed if I wasn't so fucking desperate.

"Well, I didn't deny it back then," I replied, finally able to open the bottle of lube, generously coating my fingers until they were slick and glossy. Wes gasped when I gripped his ankle, pulling him closer to the edge of the bed, his ass edging upwards, so ready for me. Sinking to my knees, I smiled

when Wes swallowed, throat bobbing and eyes locked onto my fingers until they disappeared inside him.

"Oh, shit," Wes moaned, his curled back unfurling as he threw his head back against the sheets, his fingers digging into them. "Nico, *Nico* , I need more. More. It's fine, it's fine, I want more than your fingers," Wes rambled, his thoughts clearly a mess as his words rolled over one another, almost incoherent between his gasps.

My cock twitched, and I wanted nothing more than to bury it in Wes's ass. But seeing him so desperate, I had to tease him. I had to. Pulling my fingers out of him, Wes keening at the emptiness, I stood up and positioned myself between his legs. One hand at the base of my hard-on, the other pulling on Wes's outstretched leg, I nudged my erection against his slick rim. Wes's breath hitched, body tensed with anticipation. I smirked as he eyes flew open the millisecond I pulled my cock away from him, livid.

"You didn't say please," I said, licking my lip. Wes looked at me incredulously, and I just challenged his gaze with the upturned corner of my mouth.

"You're such a-"

"Ah- say please," I said, Wes's cheeks puffing as his hands tightened on his sheets again.

" *Please,* " he said, like the words tasted sour. I laughed, brushing my cock against the rim of his ass again, which jerked towards me. Just the head of my cock managed to slip inside him, Wes groaning, once at the sensation, and again when I took it away.

"Please what?" I asked, knowing it was the last time I'll ask, because I couldn't take it any more. Even if he didn't say what I was asking him to say, even if he cursed me out, called me a 'stingy bastard' or an outright asshole, I would spoil him because I *was so fucking turned on.*

"Please shove your cock into me and fuck me, you fucking asshole," Wes gritted out.

Trust him to indulge me and cuss me out at the same time.

That's my Wes.

In one, unrestrained movement, I thrust into Wes, his body jerking with the force as he let out a loud cry. I didn't let him recover as I pulled out completely, thrusting straight back in to the hilt, my hips slapping against his again and again and again and *again.*

No matter how many times we did this, the feeling of being inside him was still as - if not more - mind blowing as it was back then. He was so fucking tight, and warm, and every time I would slam into him and hit *that* spot that only I knew how to find he would let out sounds that were nothing if not downright sinful.

Wes's thighs were red with how hard I was gripping them, and I was sure that in the morning there would be five finger-shaped bruises on each leg.

"Nico, Nico," Wes moaned, like a twisted prayer that only made me groan, letting go of his reddened thighs to lean over him, hands fisting his hair to pull his mouth to mine. Wes cried out into my mouth, his own hands clawing and scratching, tugging my hair and anything he could grab onto. As much as I've marked him, I was sure that I wouldn't leave his place unscathed either. Wes kept crying out my name, seemingly unable to form any other coherent thoughts, his ass beginning to clench in a way I knew meant that he was close.

"Are you coming, babe?" I panted, Wes unable to answer with anything more than a squeeze of my bicep. Wes's mouth hung open, breaths uneven and erratic, his head turning to the side.

"No, babe, look at me," I said, voice rough, hands turning my boyfriend's face to look at me. *God, he's so fucking beautiful.* "Let me see you when you come. I want to see you."

"Fuck, fuck, Nico, I'm coming, I'm *coming* ," Wes cried out, his back arching as he came. Thick, white cum blurted onto his stomach, his dick slapping against his stomach as I continued to ram into him, chasing my

own orgasm. Seeing Wes's face contort with such ecstasy was what tipped me over the edge, my mind growing blank as I came inside of him, this boy that I loved with everything that I had.

Wes let out a quiet 'oof' as I collapsed on top of him, our sweaty chests pressed together tightly. He let out a breathy laugh, almost sounding dazed, as his body began to climb down from its high. My body was still buzzing, though exhausted, a satisfied smile creeping onto my face as I pressed my lips to Wes's collar bone, the boy responding by carding his fingers through my hair. I felt his mouth press against my forehead, the action so tender and gentle that I shivered.

We lay there for a moment, just basking in our afterglow, until I was sure Wes was probably struggling to breathe with the weight of my body on top of his. Pulling myself up, I chuckled when Wes's face twisted into a discontented pout, his bruised lips pressing together tightly.

"We should get you cleaned up," I said slowly, glancing down at his stomach, where the evidence of our satisfaction had dried and crusted on his stomach. I couldn't help but lick my lips at the sight, so incredibly erotic that I felt blood begin to traverse downwards, but I was already spent.

When I pulled myself further off, Wes shook his head and grumbled something unintelligible, his arms tugging me back down on top of him. I laughed, enjoying his neediness, pressing a few pecks to his chest and neck.

"Okay, not yet, then."

We lay there in silence, giving me time to think about what had transpired just moments before we had sex, regret sobering me up completely.

"I'm sorry," I had said, Wes mirroring my words. Sorry, sorry, sorry. Our words were apologies that sounded like I love you's, the two of us smiling at each other towards the end of it. We forgave each other, then we teased each other, Wes spluttering when he seemed to finally grasp the fact that Jamie was still home. I stared at Wes's face, taking in his naturally wavy hair that was in chaotic disarray, the adorably panicked contour of his mouth, and the bright glimmer in his eyes. Though his words were always -

fondly - convoluted, his face was so expressive. I committed the image of him in this moment into my memory, filing the expression away close to my heart.

I wanted to see all of his expressions every day, until the day I fucking die.

"Maybe we should move out together then," I said, the words impulsive, surprising me. Wes's eyes widened even further, mouth popping open, and it was my turn to panic. *Oh God, was that too soon? Fuck, it probably too soon.* I forced my face to not bunch up, to show how terrified I was.

"What?" Wes asked, his voice trembling, eyes darting to the side as he swallowed thickly. Oh, no. No, no, no.

I shrugged, the motion excessively casual.

"We could move out together," I said, brain scrambling to explain this. To explain that this was something I hoped for, but that I could wait. That I would wait, as long as he needed. "I mean, not *now* , but after you graduate, maybe. I've been thinking about it. I mean, these days we basically always stay at each other's places anyway, and it would be easier if we moved somewhere closer to my work and your uni, wherever you get into." I mentally kicked myself as I noticed my words picking up their tempo, the panic settling in. "Uh, but only if you want to. It was just a thought."

Please.

Wes was quiet, until his brown eyes flickered back to me, cautious.

"Really?" he asked, looking a little apprehensive, his fingers nervously gripping onto the sheets beside him. "Do you really... want to move in together? Really? *Really?* " With every word, his apprehensive expression seemed to dissolve, until a giddy smile found its way onto his face. Oh, thank *God* .

Laughing with relief, I nodded, kissing the tip of his nose, the small giggle that it elicited from Wes doing things to me.

"Yes, really." Yes, yes, *yes.* "I'll take that as a yes?"

"Hell yes!" Wes shouted, pushing his body into mine with force, his squeal muffled by my chest.

I could see it then; the two of us, ten years into the future. On most days Wes would probably wake up before me. He would maybe try to get out of bed without waking me up, but he would always have trouble since we always managed to get tangled in each other's arms as we slept. I would groggily complain that he woke me up, but would forgive him straight away when he'd laugh and kiss me. Then we would roll around in bed until our stomachs grumbled at us. I would make him breakfast, and watch the happy expression on his face as he ate. He'd have tea, I'd have coffee, but we'd taste both when we'd kiss.

Maybe in ten years I would finally have my own restaurant, and Wes would maybe be a teacher. 'Mr. Dillon' I would tease him, until he grew red in the face and slapped me. I would probably use this to tease him in bed as well, and he'd pretend to hate it but the way his body responded when I called him that would tell me otherwise. Would it be Mr. Dillon though? Or Mr. Beckett?

Would we be married? I had never really considered it, not after the train wreck of a marriage that my parents had shown me. Maybe marriage wasn't at the forefront of Wes's mind either, not after the whole deal with his own parents. Maybe we'd be just happy being together, no need for signatures on a document. But maybe we would be different, maybe we would be married, to show our parents that we weren't like them.

That we'd last. That we were it. Because I knew that Wes was *it* for me.

Wes was the first for all the things that mattered. *My* first.

And he's sure as hell going to be my only.

Beneath the Sheets 2: Nico's POV

A/N: Surprise! Almost 17000 words later, here's a new bonus chapter for all of you lovely, lovely people. Just wanted to write something to hopefully help you guys get through this difficult time. Hoping everyone is staying safe and healthy ❤

<u>*'The'* Day - Part I</u>

"Nico."

Fingers prodded my bare back, warm and familiar, and far too annoying for 8 o'clock in the morning, or whatever unholy time it was right now. I grumbled a response, rolling my shoulder to get the warm fingers off my back. They paused, and there was a huff behind me, before the fingers turned into a hand that began shaking me against the bedsheets.

"Nico, wake up," the voice said, softening as it tried to coax me out from the very, very comforting and tempting arms of sleep.

"No, 's too early," I whined, burrowing my head under my pillow.

"It's 9, Nico," the voice said flatly, losing its warm, honey-ish tinge. Impatient. Unamused. *Annoyed* .

"Exactly," I retorted, my own annoyance beginning to seep into my tone as sleep began to wander away from me despite my attempts to chase after it. The hands began pinching at the sides of my torso, unrelenting. Fuck.

" *Nico,"* the voice said again, a larger weight now pressing against my back. "Your restaurant's grand opening is today, you know? You have to get up." The pillow was soon ripped away from my head, and I pried my eyes open reluctantly to face my very annoyingly cute boyfriend, whose face was scrunched up with exasperation.

"You're annoying as hell, you know that, right, Wes?" I grumbled, flopping over onto my back, shooting the man a tired glare. "I got like, what, 6 hours of sleep last night?"

"And whose fault was that?" Wes replied, crossing his arms over his chest as he raised an accusing brow. Rubbing my eyes, vision clearing of sleep, I looked over my boyfriend slowly, like I did every morning. He was wearing my T-shirt, which was a little too big on his shoulders and a little too long for his torso, the hem dropping just above the curve of his ass which was unfortunately covered by his briefs, which clung to his thighs. His eyes were a little tired, but far more alert than what I could imagine mine to be, and curly brown hair flew around this way and that, looking like a tornado had run through it the night before.

Or my fingers.

Definitely my fingers.

When I gripped his hair when I pounded into him in the early hours of the morning last night, his - *my* - shirt riding up his freckled back as he desperately dug his fingers into the headboard, moaning.

The corner of my lips tugged upwards as I reached towards the endearing mess atop Wes's head, carding my fingers through the winding locks. I could see Wes's annoyance begin to slip as my hand trailed from his hair down to his cheek, brushing across the light pink speckled there, warm under my touch.

"Mornin', babe," I murmured, Wes rolling his eyes as he grabbed my hand from his face. He flopped down beside me with his head on my shoulder, slinging a leg over mine and pulling my arm around him before snuggling into my side. I snorted a little at his pushiness, but nonetheless indulged him, pulling him closer and pressing a kiss to his messy hair.

"You have work to do," Wes reminded me, his voice soft.

"I know."

"We should get up."

"I know."

"You're an idiot."

"That, I do *not* know," I said, chuckling as Wes slapped my chest lightly, before nestling himself even closer, completely giving up on getting either of us out of bed.

The two of us didn't say much for a while after that, Wes just running his fingers over the pulse of my heart as I listened to his steady breaths, enjoying the feel of him. It wasn't every morning that we could lie around like this; with Wes working as a teacher, he was always long gone before I would even wake up, the bed a little colder on his side. It was only on weekends that I could hold him like this in the morning without a need to let go.

So, whenever there was a chance to hold him, I took it. Because it was everything.

He was everything.

It wasn't long before Wes's fingers stopped moving on my chest, and his breathing completely evened out, a light snore passing his parted lips every now and again. Peering down at him, sleeping so peacefully despite being the one to rudely wake me up, made me smile, my heart hammering in my chest as I remembered what day it was today. If he were awake, Wes would have felt the sudden uptake in my heart beat under his fingertips, and it would have given everything away.

Because today was the day I was going to propose to him.

We've been together for ten years, and I knew that I had wanted to marry him a long, long time ago. It was never a matter of who, or a matter of where, or a matter of how. How I would propose didn't matter, it was the question that did. No matter how I asked, the question was the same. The only thing that was off balance was the *when* .

When Wes was ready. When I was ready. When *we* were ready.

Until now, one of these three things was never quite right. But now, *now* , I could feel that it was time, deep down in my bones.

Running my fingers through Wes's hair, the boy stirring but not waking, I smiled as I tried to still my heart. Everything that has happened to get us to this point, to be here, right now, in this moment, I wouldn't change for the world.

Eleven Years Ago

I am so fucking tired .

I leaned on the hind legs of my chair, the backrest pressing against the back wall of the classroom as I closed my eyes against the dim fluorescent lights which did nothing to drive away my fatigue. The teacher's voice became nothing but background noise as I struggled to keep myself awake, the coffee I downed on the way to school doing nothing but make me need to piss.

Fuck this.

The girl sitting beside me - Sarah, Stella, Steph or something else starting with S - giggled as she pressed her hand to my bicep, attempting to pull my drifting attention towards her. Biting back a curse, I turned towards her, not bothering to school the deep frown set in my features. Brown eyes looked up at me expectantly, as if she were waiting for me to say something.

"What?" I barked out, the girl flinching at the tone, laughing lightly to cover her discomfort.

"Oh, well, I was just wondering..." the girl started, coyly looking down at her hand on my arm, and then back to my eyes with a flirtatious gleam, "since we had such a *great* time last week, maybe we could do it again?"

Yeah, fuck this . I'm too tired for this shit.

"Look, Sarah, is it?" I started, the girl's expression stiffening.

"It's Stella," she said tightly, having the sense to drop her hand from my arm.

See, it was Stella. 1/3 chance.

"Stella," I said, shrugging. "Yeah, last week was fun. But I don't do repeats, because the second time is never as fun." Especially not when you start catching feelings, and then you keep asking for more, and more, and more, until you realise that there is nothing that I want to give. Not to you, not to the girl before you.

Hell, maybe never to any one.

"But-" Stella started, her hand once again back on my arm, already asking for *more* .

"The answer's no, Stephanie," I said coldly, wrenching my arm from hers just as there was a loud slam of a book against a desk from the front of the classroom.

"Nico Beckett," the teacher seethed, mouth pulled into a smile that was anything but pleasant.

"Patrick," I answered back, pushing my weight forward, chair slamming down onto the ground with a deafening crash. Leaning on the desk casually, I grinned at the clear anger building in the bald teacher's head, which began to shine under the lights as he sweated.

"That's 'Mr Keech' to you," the man spat, pushing his way between the desks as he made his way towards me. Arms crossed when he reached my desk, the man in the middle of a mid-life crisis and expensive divorce attempted to level me with an imposing stare, which would have scared me if I actually gave a shit about any of this.

"Oh, *sorry* , Sir Keech," I said, dipping my head in a false bow. "I didn't mean to offend you."

"And I'm sure you didn't mean to disrupt the class, either, did you Mr Beckett?" Mr Keech - *Patrick* - said, throwing his hands wildly to gesture around the classroom. Everyone was looking, amused at my antics, or at Patrick's increasingly shiny head that was now growing a startling shade of red.

"Disrupting the class? I wouldn't dare," I said, snorting a little. *I just want to sleep. Or smoke. Smoke then sleep.*

Ugh, I hate this.

"You really have some nerve, son," Patrick said, my grin fracturing slightly. "Don't think I haven't noticed you sleeping at the back there, or having a lovely chat with Miss Stella here. If you're not going to pay attention in class, it might be better for you not to come at all. While you obviously don't care about your future, don't try to ruin everyone else's. There are students here who are trying to learn, something that you seem incapable of doing."

Anger bubbled up inside my gut, my fingers gripping the edge of my chair beneath the desk.

"You know what, maybe you're right, *Patrick* ," I said, getting up from my chair quickly, its legs screeching against the floor. "Maybe it was better for me not to come at all, then I wouldn't have to deal with your shit."

"You-"

"See you later, Patrick," I said, pushing past Sarah-Stephanie-Sonya or whatever's chair, leaving the classroom to a symphony of curses at my back, not giving two tosses about anyone in that room.

Because fuck school, and fuck everyone here.

No one can see how bloody tired I am. No one can see who *I* am.

When will there be someone who can see me as I am?

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"Hey, give me one of those, man," Isaac said, gesturing to the cigarette box I was fiddling with in my hand. I let out a light huff, bumping one out and offering it to him before taking one out for myself and pressing it between my lips. "Thanks."

"Need a light?" I asked, lighting mine up and taking a long drag, smoke swirling in front of my face, obscuring Isaac from view. Isaac shook his head, his own lighter already in his hand and cigarette wedged between his fingers.

The two of us sat at the back of the school, having ditched both of our classes. While mine was because Patrick was an ass and his monologue on calculus was mind-numbing, Isaac skipped because he was busy getting busy with someone from his sports class in the disabled bathroom. The whole thing apparently didn't take up the whole period, so after he got his rocks off he joined me as he usually did for a smoke.

"So, who were you doing earlier?" I asked casually, Isaac's eyes brightening as he smirked, taking a long drag.

"Oh, that was Lauren," Isaac grinned, looking upwards as if he were remembering her, and I breathed out a short laugh.

"Don't know her."

"Red head," Isaac replied, looking at me as if *that* would bring some sense of recognition to me. I gave him a blank look in return, my friend rolling his eyes.

" *Natural* red head, year below us? The super flexible dancer, friends with what's her name - Alyssa. The bleach blonde who is also really fucking hot, might I add," Isaac said, whistling as he exhaled his smoke.

"Don't know 'em," I said, shrugging.

"You never do," Isaac said, flicking some ash at me before elbowing my side, smiling. "Anyway, I'm fucking starving. Wanna grab lunch?"

"Didn't have time to bring any," I said, sighing. Taking the final drag from my cigarette, crushing the dying embers beneath my shoes, I shrugged again. "And no money. I didn't get paid last week. *Again* ."

"Your boss is an asshole," Isaac grunted, spitting on the ground. "Fuck him. Just quit."

"You know I need the money, Isaac," I said gruffly, running my fingers through my hair, shoulders heavy. Giving Isaac a look, at his expensive watch and designer wallet in his pocket, the corner of my mouth quirked up. "Not that you'd understand." Isaac smiled, revealing straight, white teeth, shoving me lightly.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm rich, whatever," Isaac said, rolling his eyes. "Which is why I told you I could lend you some money."

"And I told you I don't like borrowing money," I replied, replaying a conversation we had had many times before. Isaac's family was well off - his father was a lawyer, his mother ran a successful online business, and they had come from old money previously anyway.

"Yep, you've made that pretty clear," Isaac responded, exasperated. "At least let me buy you lunch, man."

"Maccas?"

"You drive, I buy?"

"Deal," I said, just as a heavy weight crashed into Isaac's back, sending him stumbling forwards, cigarette dropping from his mouth in surprise.

"Did I hear someone mention Maccas?" Colin grinned, face bright as he slung his arms over Isaac's shoulders, like an over-sized puppy.

"Yeah, I'm buying," Isaac said, wrestling Colin's arm off him with a laugh. "You coming with?"

"I thought you'd *never* ask," Colin said, pressing his palm over his heart, genuinely touched. "In return, I ended up talking to my brother's uni friend.

I think they can get us into that club tonight."

"For real?" Isaac said, brow raised, giddiness radiating off him. Colin nodded, Isaac punching his arm as he grinned widely. "Nico, you're coming, right?"

"I've got work," I said, Isaac's face falling.

"Yeah, work you're *not getting paid for* because of your dickhead boss. Just ditch him, man. Tonight will be fun."

"Maybe next weekend," I said, quickly checking the time on my phone. "And it's officially lunch time."

"Oh, thank God," Colin said, stomach grumbling as he spoke. Isaac and I looked at each other, before rolling our eyes.

"Calm down, Colin."

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I hate my job.

Those words were all I could hear in my head as my boss - dickhead Daryl - grilled me about whatever had his pants in a twist that particular evening.

"Nicolas! Table six has been waiting to have their orders taken for 15 minutes already, what the hell have you been doing?!"

"I was managing tables nine and ten, Daryl," I said, straining to keep my voice level and to *not* paint Daryl's face with a pretty bruise. "Which are Oscar's tables." Daryl's brow twitched, teeth gnashing together.

"Are you talking back to me? I am your boss, boy - I could easily just fire your ass right now. Would you like that, kid?"

'You're three weeks behind on my wage, you fucking pig,' I bit back, instead forcing a tight-lipped smile on my face.
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"No," I gritted out, fisting the black apron around my waist in my hand to avoid strangling something else. "I'll go take table six's orders now."

"You fucking better," Daryl said loudly, waving his hands in the air to shoo me out of the back kitchen.

Quickly plastering on my best customer service smile, ignoring the way the Karen-lookalike glanced at my lip ring and snorted with disgust, I took their orders and relayed them to the kitchen, which brusquely snatched the docket from my hands. As I was making my way back to clear some tables, I saw Oscar - my fellow waiter who is both lazy as hell, and apparently hates my guts for some reason.

"Hey," I said, grabbing Oscar's arm and pulling him to the side, away from the eyes of the customers.

"What the fuck, dude! Let go of me," Oscar spat, pushing my grip off him, wincing. "The fuck is your problem?!"

" *My* problem?" I scoffed, incredulous. "You're the one leaving your tables for no reason, making me pick up the slack and getting grilled by Daryl. I don't get why you hate me so much, but can you at least do your damn jo-"

"You don't get why?" Oscar snapped, shoving my chest harshly. "You slept with my fucking girlfriend!"

Oh.

"Did I?" I asked, frowning. "Didn't know you had a girlfriend."

"That's all you're going to say?" Oscar laughed dryly, the sound grating.

"Dude, I don't even *know* who your girlfriend is," I said, shrugging. "She probably came onto me, man. She clearly didn't make it obvious that she had a boyfriend." *Not that I would want to, if you were my boyfriend. That would be embarrassing as hell.*

"You're such a fucking piece of shit," Oscar growled, attempting to shove me again, but I snorted and grabbed his arms, shoving him roughly into the

wall, the boy grunting in pain.

"Try that again and you'll be going *through* the wall," I said, voice low, challenging. "Look, I'm sorry about your girlfriend or whatever. Who I didn't even know was your girlfriend." *Who I still don't remember.* "But can you stop being a petty bitch and do your fucking job?"

"Fuck you," Oscar cursed, pushing himself off the wall, brushing his pants off.

"No thanks," I replied, turning to go back and do my job. "Table six's entrees are ready to be served, by the way. They're your table now."

Oscar did end up doing his job for a short while, though he made it his mission to glare at me every time he passed, or make snide remarks under his breath *just* loud enough for me to hear. However, by the time table six had gotten their mains, he had disappeared to God knows where again, knowing that Daryl wouldn't have his ass for it, but mine. I schooled back a grimace when I saw Karen from table 6 waving me over with a frown etched into her thin lips.

"Is there a problem, ma'am?" I asked, voice sickly pleasant as the woman jerked her hand towards her steak, which was cut near the edge.

"I asked for medium rare, is this is medium!" the woman seethed, positively outraged at the great calamity the world has apparently thrust upon her. Her husband looked a little uncomfortable, but didn't say anything and hastily shovelled some fries into his mouth.

If you cut in the middle, your bloody steak is probably medium rare.

"I do apologise, would you like me to get the kitchen to make you a new dish?" I asked, moving to take her plate.

"Hmph, yes, but I'd like another waiter. It's obvious that you made a mistake taking down our orders. I mean, just *look* at you," Karen sniggered, gesturing from her steak to my face. "With all that metal in your face, I'm sure you have some of those gang tattoos somewhere. Get me that other

waiter, the one who brought us our entrees. He is obviously more of the decent sort."

Her words cut deeper than I wanted to admit they did, tickling at something I had been hearing for a long time and pretended I didn't care about. It hurt, but as always, I plastered a service smile on my face, apologised, and left to find Oscar who was suddenly very happy to do his job. I could see him chatting with medium-rare-Karen, both of them glancing at me conspiratorially.

' *Just quit,'* Isaac's voice rang in my head, and I was so, so tempted to just throw it all out the window.

But Daryl was right - I did need the money. Grandma was getting old, too old to work and support the both of us, so I had to at least lighten some of the burden and pay for what I could on my own. Even though Daryl was always late with my pay, the wage itself was better than at other places and the hours suited me better, despite leaving me bone-tired. It was also a nightmare even getting hired elsewhere, other employers not wanting to employ me outright. Not a high school kid who looked like more trouble than he was worth.

Steeling my nerves, I dug my fingernails into the palms of my hands, almost hard enough to cut when I heard Daryl screech at me to wait on table 5. Oscar's table.

Yeah. I hate this job.

Twenty-One Years Ago

The Wiggles were playing in the background, something Mama had put on while she got ready. She didn't realise that I was too old for them and didn't like them any more. Instead, I stuck my headphones into my ears, listening to music she said was bad, but papa said was cool. The music was loud, but I liked it because it was louder than their voices when they were yelling. She didn't like it when I listened to the same music as papa, but on nights like this, she was too distracted to notice.

She had asked me earlier if the red dress or the green dress was better, but they were both terrible. Or maybe it was the way she did her hair weirdly and made her mouth bright red like a clown whenever she wore those types of dresses, the ones you should only wear when the sun is really hot and anything that covers a lot of skin makes you sweaty. She has been wearing these dresses more lately, whenever she goes out to play with the other man that looks like papa but isn't.

I ignored the sound of the TV while doing the at-home task my Year 2 teacher - Mrs Wallace - gave us to do. Because it was almost the summer holidays, which means it's almost Christmas time, she said that we should make a list about all the things we want for Christmas and to make it was pretty as we can.

"Oh, it's looking wonderful, Nicolas," Grandma said happily, rubbing my shoulders and kissing my head as she walked past. Grandma often stayed with us, since papa was always at work and mama was busy. "It looks like you put that gold glitter we bought to good use. And I like how you cut out the Christmas tree shapes."

"Thanks Grandma," I said, smiling through my gapped teeth. I loved mama and papa, but I think I loved grandma the most. Was I supposed to like grandma more than my parents? Some people said that was weird, but their grandmas were probably dead, or not as nice as my grandma. My grandma was the coolest. Even though she looks like an older version of mama, she didn't wear those weird dresses or paint her face like a clown. She also didn't smell like those fake flowers mama sprays on herself; she smells like the real ones in the garden. Grandma also made good food. Mama only knew how to microwave things, and that never tasted as good as Grandma's cooking.

"I see that you've cut out some candy canes," Grandma said, stroking my hair fondly as she pointed to the colourful shapes I had laid out in front of me. "Where are you going to put them?"

"I want to put them here, here and here, but I have no more glue. Mama said she would get some, but I think she forgot," I said, shrugging my shoulders. "It's okay though, Mama sometimes forgets things."

Grandma's hand on my back stopped moving for a second, before she moved to wrap her arms around me, hugging me tightly.

"Yes she does," Grandma said, voice a little shaky. "But, I'm going out to buy some groceries now, so I can get you some more glue. How about you write down your Christmas wishes first, and then when I get back we can glue the candy canes and ginger bread men together."

Growing excited, I turned and tugged on Grandma's sleeve.

"Can I help you cook dinner again today?" I asked eagerly. Cooking with Grandma was always fun. She hasn't let me use the knife yet, but she said when I get better at making the sauce I can start helping her cut the vegetables.

"Of course," Grandma said, chuckling gently. "Is there anything you wanted to have for dinner?"

"Pasta!" I said, tugging on Grandma's arm again. "The creamy one with bacon!"

"That's not very healthy, Nicolas," Grandma said, pinching my nose playfully.

"We... We can have salad too then. I guess," I grumbled, crinkling my nose, which made her pinch it again.

"That's my boy," Grandma said, pressing another kiss to the side of my head before grabbing her shopping basket and hat. "Now get back to your work, honey. I'll be back soon."

"Okay!"

Grandma soon left, and I turned my music back on and got to work on my Christmas list. Mrs Wallace said we needed to write down ten things. Writing my name at the top in black first - Nicolas Gallo - I thought about what I wanted for Christmas. The first seven things were easy, and I bit my lip as I wrote down the things I wanted with a green texta; a Gameboy

Advance, new mp3 player, new shoes (the ones with the wheels on them that Grandma said was too dangerous to wear), a new football, and a matching team jersey, an apron that fits and a new saucepan for Grandma, because the handle broke on the one she liked.

I nibbled on the end of the texta while staring at the three blank spaces left. He heart felt fuzzy as I thought of three things that I wanted. They were probably the things I wanted the most. Writing the next one was easy, and I was very careful to make sure my hand-writing was nice and straight.

8. I wish for Grandma to not get sick (because she is old and says her back hurts sometimes)

I nodded at my handiwork, my writing nice and straight in green. I swallowed as I moved to number 9, glancing at the corridor where mama was getting ready to meet her friend. I then looked at the clock, and it was already six o'clock. Papa was supposed to be home already, but I guess he's working late again. I guess Grandma and I will have to put his dinner in the fridge so he can eat it later.

I huffed when the song changed to one I didn't like very much, and I quickly changed it before writing number 9.

9. I want my mama and papa to stop yelling at home

I made sure the texta was dry before writing number 10. For some reason, my chest was tight, my heart going 'dun-dun, dun-dun' a little faster than normal. Maybe it was because I really, *really* wanted this one.

10. I want to be loved

I frowned when my writing went a little wonky at the end. Mrs Wallace might write on my report that my hand writing isn't that good, but hopefully she likes my Christmas trees and candy canes.

I finished cutting out a few more candy canes, before I heard the door open. Papa walked into the room, and he looked tired. His mouth was turned

down, and he looked a little scary, like how he looks when he and mama have Grown Up Talk.

When he saw me, papa smiled a little, and my heart blew up. I climbed off the chair, pulling my earphones out, the loud music disappearing.

"Welcome home, papa!" I said, giving him a hug. Papa laughed a little, wrapping his arm around my shoulders and squeezing tight.

"Hey, bud. How was school?"

"Good! Harry gave me some of his biscuits during morning tea, and then we played tag and I caught everyone! Mrs Wallace also said that my drawing was really goo-"

Suddenly, papa's arms weren't around me any more, and the loud noise came back.

"Nina, where the *hell* do you think you're going, dressed like that?" papa yelled, rushing past me. I could smell the fake flowers before I even turned around, and I knew mama was there. Papa definitely didn't like the dress either. I wonder what he thought about her hair.

"Out," mama said, voice sharp. "I'm genuinely surprised to see you home though, Harvey. I thought you forgot your address, considering you've been holed up at work this whole time!"

"Yeah? Well at least I'm not the one sneaking off to fuck some bastard when I'm supposed to be looking after my kid!"

Mama is always out with other people because she doesn't love me.

"My mum's keeping an eye on him, and unlike you, I'm always home every night!" mama said loudly, her voice climbing. I wanted to say something, but my throat felt tight, like someone had shoved lots of bubble gum down there.

"You're a poor excuse for a wife, and an even worse mother!" papa yelled, mama's face growing almost as red as her mouth.

My eyes started to feel itchy, and the bubble gum in my throat grew and grew. Papa was too loud, and mama was getting louder and louder too. I want to get my music, but it's on the table and I don't want to walk past mama and papa to get it, my legs nailed to the ground.

"You're one to talk! You never look after him!"

Papa's never here because he doesn't love me.

My vision grew blurry, and my cheeks were sticky. A choked noise left my mouth but mama and papa didn't hear it. Unlike my music, my voice wasn't louder than the yelling.

"I work hard to provide for him! And what do you do? Sleep with every fucker on the street?!"

"Fuck you, Harvey!"

" *Enough of this!* " a voice shouted from the door way. Everyone turned to see Grandma standing there, grocery bags in her hands and her face looking angrier than I've ever seen it. Grandma was always smiling, so it was weird seeing her face like that, but I wasn't scared, because she wasn't looking at me. Her blue eyes that looked like mine looked between mama and papa, her mouth set in a thin line. It wasn't long before the shopping bags were on the ground, and Grandma pulling me towards her with warm, gentle hands.

When Grandma's warmth seeped into me, the smell of real flowers cloaking me in an embrace, I cried. I didn't cry a lot, not even when I fell off my bike and scraped my knee. I was a big boy, Grandma always told me that, and I tried really, really hard to be a big boy now, but it was just so loud.

"Look at what you're doing to him!" Grandma said, her voice thick and trembling. "You know what, I never should've let it go on for this long. Nicolas deserves better than you two!"

"Mum! You know it's all because Harvey is never-"

"So you're putting the blame on me, Nina? That's rich! You've bloody lost it if you really think that *I* -"

"Oh, shut up! The both of you!" Grandma said, pulling me closer before bending down to wipe some of the wetness from my cheeks. Her voice grew quiet when she spoke to me, like she always did. I always loved how Grandma was quiet and took away the loudness.

"Nicolas, what do you think about coming to live with me?" Grandma said, smiling as I blinked away the tears, sniffling. My nose was all clogged and my throat was raw after crying, but I nodded. Rubbing my eyes, I stood up straight. Because I was a big boy.

"I want to," I said, hugging Grandma tightly. "I want to live with you, Grandma."

Where it's quiet, and mama and papa don't yell. Where Grandma won't play The Wiggles because she knows I don't like them, and we can cook together every day.

"You can't take him with you," mama said, eyes wide. "Mum!"

"You may be Nicolas's legal guardians, but by God, I can prove that you are both unfit to look after him," Grandma said, voice determined.

"Belinda, you don't expect me to just let you take my son away from me-"

"Mum, I'm your *daughter* ! Nicolas is my *son* -"

"Well you haven't acted as his parents for years," Grandma said sternly, stroking my head softly. "If you have even the tiniest speck of love for this boy, then let him stay with me. If not, I'll be back tomorrow and make him come any way. Because that's what you want, right, Nicolas?"

"Mm!" I said, nodding emphatically. "I want to live with Grandma!"

I didn't look at mama and papa, burying my head in Grandma's arms. Mama and papa said something, and soon enough Grandma sent me to my bedroom to pack up some clothes and things for school. When I came back with a bag stuffed full of my things, picking up my Christmas list on the way, mama and papa were silent and glaring at each other. Grandma didn't talk to them as she helped carry my bag for me, telling me that we can come back another day to get some more things.

"Bye mama, papa," I said, the two of them looking at me, faces more angry than sad. I swallowed the lump in my throat when Grandma took my hand.

"You can visit them when you want to, Nicolas. I'm not stopping you from seeing your parents," Grandma said, and I nodded, pushing back the twisting feeling in my chest as I looked up at her. Smiling at my Grandma, I shook my head.

"No, I don't need to. I'm a big boy," I said with determination, Grandma chuckling, eyes crinkling at the corners. "And I like being with Grandma more anyway."

"Really? Well, I like being with you the most, Nicolas," Grandma said, the twisting feeling in my chest stopping, replaced by a light flutter that warmed me up on the inside.

When I got to Grandma's house, after we made dinner and watched some cartoons together, I crossed out number 10 on my Christmas list and wrote a new one:

~~*10. I want to be loved*~~
10. I want to live with Grandma forever

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Aunty Shelly put down two big glasses of juice on the coffee table next to me and my cousin, Marcus Gallo, patting us both on the head before disappearing into the kitchen again. Marcus was one year older than me, so he always acted like I was a kid. But I was 8 years old, and not a little boy any more. I didn't like Marcus a lot, but since I started living at Grandma's,
~~~

she had to start working at the flower shop. Since it was the school holidays, Aunty Shelly came over to look after me during the day time, even though I told Grandma I could take care of myself. I wouldn't mind it if it was just Aunty Shelly, but she always brought Marcus too.

Last time Marcus was here, he said some weird stuff about mama and papa. He said that it was weird that I wasn't living with them even though they're not dead, and that he heard papa - his uncle - talking on the phone with his dad. Apparently he called mama lots of naughty words.

"And why is your last name different now? That's weird," Marcus said, looking at the name I wrote on my new pencil case. 'Nicolas Beckett'.

"My Grandma's last name is Beckett, so I'm a Beckett too," I said, shrugging. It sounds better than Nico Gallo, anyway.

"Well Gallo sounds better. You should have kept our last name," Marcus said bluntly, making me feel a little sick.

"That's not true," I said slowly, my teeth grinding together.

"Well, I'm older than you, so I obviously know more," Marcus replied petulantly, before ignoring me for the rest of the afternoon.

Right now, Marcus was playing with his Gameboy Advance on the floor next to me while I watched. Aunty Shelly said that he should share it with me since I didn't have one (yet, but it was on my Christmas list so hopefully I would get one soon); Marcus didn't let me play, though, because since I was younger than him he thought I would make him lose. He was already losing any way. Papa always said he was a dumb shit, but since that's a naughty word I didn't say it out loud.

Rolling my eyes when Marcus ran into a banana, his go-kart spinning, I moved to grab my drink.

"No, that's my one!" Marcus said, throwing the Gameboy on the ground and pushing my hand away, grabbing the cup in front of me. "I'm older, so I have to have the one with more juice."

I glared at Marcus, looking at the two glasses. They were different shapes; the one in Marcus's hand was tall but skinny, but the other one shorter and fat. They probably had the same amount in them any way, his one was just taller.

"Dumb shit," I mumbled, taking the fat cup and drinking the sweet liquid slowly. Marcus looked at me with heat in his eyes, before jumping to his feet.

"Mummy! Nicolas said a naughty word!" Marcus yelled, making me roll my eyes and laugh dryly. Even though he was one year older, he was still a baby and always complained to his mum about everything. Everyone knows that dibber dobbers wear nappies.

Aunty Shelly popped her head around the corner, drying her hands with a kitchen towel, eyebrow raised.

"What did you say, Marcus?" my aunt asked, Marcus turning to me for a moment to gloat, his dibber dobber mouth about to babble like a baby again. *Dumb shit.*

"Nicolas said a naughty word," Marcus said proudly, hands on his hips, triumphant. Aunty Shelly threw the kitchen towel on the table, walking over and bending over.

"Did you say a naughty word, Nicolas?" she asked, voice kind, making Marcus's grin falter a little bit. A small smirk tickled my mouth as I shook my head.

"I didn't, Aunty Shelly," I said, pointing to the game, where Marcus had come 7th in the Mario Kart race. "I said 'don't get hit', because Luigi was right behind him and had a green shell."

"You liar! You didn't say that! You said ' *dumb shit'* " Marcus yelled, Aunty Shelly whirling around to him, frowning sternly.

"Marcus, watch your language! Who taught you that word?" Aunt Shelly chastised, Marcus's face puffing out and his ears growing red as he looked

between me and his mum. My grin widened, and I tugged on my aunt's arm, rubbing my mouth beforehand to try get rid of my smile.

"A-And Marcus wouldn't let me play... he's done 5 races and I haven't done any." *And he lost all of them. Dumb shit.*

"Marcus! Is that true?" Aunty Shelly asked, gasping. Marcus's whole face went red this time, and I had to hide my laugh. "Let your cousin have a go, Marcus."

"But-"

"No buts!" Aunty Shelly said, pointing to the game on the ground. "Now give that to Nicolas and let him play for a bit while you drink your juice." Aunty Shelly fixed him with another look until Marcus gave me the game with a grumble, before going back to the kitchen.

"Hmph. You better not lose," Marcus said, and I rolled my eyes. Marcus angrily chugged on his juice while I played, and by the end of the race his drink had been forgotten as he stared, slack jawed, as my character did a victory lap after winning.

Take that, dumb shit.

Pride swelled up inside me as I shoved the game back into Marcus's hands, my cousin spluttering. It was then that the front door to the house opened, revealing Grandma. Grandma looked a little tired, but when she saw me running up to her, her whole face lit up like it always did. I'm sure my face looked the same as I slammed into her, hugging around her middle.

"What a nice welcome home," Grandma laughed, ruffling my hair. "Did you have a good day?"

Yeah, I taught a dumb shit a lesson.

"Yes," I said, nodding happily. "But I was waiting for you to get home so we can start making dinner!"

"Oh, were you?" Grandma said, beaming. "Well, let me go clean up first, I have dirt on me from work. Then we can get started, okay?"

"Okay!"

Grandma gave me a pat on the back before talking to Aunty Shelly, who soon left with Marcus. While Grandma went upstairs, I waited for her in the kitchen, reading the recipe for chicken caccia-whatever. I couldn't read some of the words, but the recipe had pictures so I could sort of follow what was going on. I was hoping that Grandma would let me use the knives today - maybe just the small ones, though. The big ones looked a little scary.

While I was reading the part about the tomatoes, the phone on the wall across from me rang. Looking up at the stairs, I figured that Grandma was still showering, so I jumped off the tall chair and answered the phone.

"Hello? Nicolas Beckett speaking," I said, just like Grandma taught me.

" *Nicolas* ?"

"Mama?" I asked, my heart a rabbit in my chest. I shrunk against the wall, my hands wrapping tightly around the phone. My response was welcomed by a chime-like laugh that crackled down the line.

"I like the sound of your new name, honey! Sounds much better than Gallo, don't you think. Now it's much more like mummy," mama said, delight evident in her tone.

"But mama's last name is also Gallo," I said, confused.

"Oh, honey. I changed my name, just like you. See, we're both the same, baby. We always have been."

The bubble gum that I thought was in my stomach travelled back up my throat, and it was a little hard to breathe. Mama continued talking, and she didn't use any naughty words but they felt naughty any way.

"Since we have the same last name now, why don't you come and live with me. Your... Your papa isn't here, so things will be better," mama said, voice eager. Coaxing. It was the same voice she would use whenever papa would be home and she didn't want me to talk to him. I stood up a little straighter. Maybe if papa wasn't there, the house won't be so loud... and mama... mama might spend more time with me. Just the two of us, like what Grandma and I have been doing since I started living with her. Maybe...

"Doesn't that sound like a good idea, honey? Your mama has a nice friend who has a really big house that we're going to live at. It can probably fit 100 people in it, so there will be lots of room for us three! He thinks you'll really like it. And there's a swimming pool, too!"

I pulled the phone from my ear like it burned.

"Nicolas? Did you find the recipe for- oh." Grandma appeared in the kitchen, her hair tied up and her lavender apron already tied around her body. Seeing my face, Grandma quickly crossed the room, dropping to her knees and cupping her hands around my face.

"Mama... mama is on the phone," I said, my voice weak and like a Marcus's - a *baby's* . I hated sounding like a baby. Rubbing my eyes and coughing a little, I gave the phone to Grandma. "Mum called."

Grandma blinked, eyes looking at me for a long time, before she took the phone. Instead of standing up to talk, Grandma sat on the floor, pulling me into her lap.

"Nina... No, you don't... That's not right and you know it... You know it would be better for Nicolas to stay with me and not with you and that man that- No, I'm not going to allow it. Yes, you're my daughter, but Nicolas is my grandson and I'm going to do what's best for him. Yes, you can try, but we both know what the outcome will be. Yes, bye." I could hear the beep as mum hung up, Grandma reaching up to put the phone back in its holder.

"I... I don't have to leave, right?" I asked, looking at Grandma. "I don't want to leave."

"You don't have to do anything you don't want to, honey," Grandma said, kissing my cheek. "Never, okay?"

"Okay," I said, smiling at Grandma, getting up from her lap. "I want to cut the vegetables today!"

"Ah, I guess you can, since you're definitely big enough to now," Grandma said, helping me tie my apron on. "Now, do you want to tell me where to start?"

"We need to... season the chicken with salt and pepper!" I said, reading from the recipe, before crinkling my brows. "Grandma, how do you season a chicken with salt and pepper? Aren't they summer, autumn, winter and spring?"

Looking at Grandma with confusion, who was covering her mouth with her hand and looking back at me with sparkling eyes, I felt warm and safe and happy.

"Alrighty. Let Grandma teach you how to season chicken."

Fourteen Years Ago

"Gran, I told you that you should take it easy," I grumbled, helping Bell lower herself into her bed. The older woman winced as the movement caused something in her back to twinge, and I sighed under my breath. Propping her up on some pillows, I crossed my arms.

"Oh, Nicolas, don't give me that look, you're making me feel like an invalid," Grandma said, waving her hand in the air. "I am very much still a spring chicken, you know."

"Yeah, a spring chicken who *threw her back out lifting a flower pot* ," I said, gesturing to her pained position.

"It was a big pot," Grandma said, grinning, but I was unamused. It hadn't been nice getting a call from Shelly just as school finished up saying that Bell was at the doctor because of a slipped disc. She had mentioned

hurriedly that it wasn't a serious issue and that she would be recover with stretches and muscle training, plus some painkillers to help deal with the discomfort, but that was beside the point.

It was a minor injury today, but what about the next time?

Anxiety bubbled inside my stomach, but I pushed it down. Grandma didn't need me to be nervous right now. She has looked after me for six years already, working even though she was getting old. I was fourteen now, I could get a job (albeit a part-time and low-paying one), and that would at least reduce the amount of hours Grandma would have to work. In a few more years, I could get a higher-paying job, and maybe even quit school to work more.

Things would hopefully be easier when I'm a bit older, but right now was the problem.

"Your brain looks like it's about to implode, honey. I can hear you overthinking from here," Grandma snorted, patting the space beside her. "Lie down with me. No, wait. Make us some tea, then lie down next to me." I made a show of rolling my eyes, Bell attempting to throw a pillow at me before giving up since it jostled her back, giving me a 'you're not getting away with that' look. I just laughed, went downstairs to make her tea - and a coffee for me - before crawling onto the bed beside her.

Even sitting up straight against the head board, my legs stretched out beyond hers. I had surpassed her in height late last year, and I've just been growing exponentially ever since. Bell gave up adding pencil marks to the door, not being able to reach above my head, much to her displeasure.

Taking a long sip from her tea, already looking much more comfortable, Bell turned to me.

"Nicolas, I know you're worried about me, and I'm thankful," Grandma said, rubbing my cheek with her thumb, warmed from the tea. "But you don't have to. Your job is to just... be a kid, you know? Go out with your friends, do your school work. Maybe get into some trouble - legal, of course," she continued, grinning with mischief.

"But Gran, you... you really shouldn't be working this much," I said, fingers fiddling with my cup. "I could work part-time. I'm fourteen now, they'll let me work a cash register, or clean up shops and stuff. It won't pay a whole lot, but it's better than nothing."

"Oh, Nicolas," Bell sighed, smiling a little as she took my hand in her wrinkly one. "That's... not what I want for you. I don't want you to have to worry about any of that."

"Well, I *want* to worry about it. And you were the one who said I never have to do anything I don't want to, remember?"

"Oh, bloody hell," Bell cursed, slapping herself on the forehead. "I was hoping you'd forget about that."

"Nope," I chuckled, popping the 'p'. "So I'm going to work, and you should just rest up and get your back fixed."

"There's no stopping you, is there," Bell sighed, giving me a last, hopeful look which I shot down quickly. "Well, if you're going to work part-time, the flower shop I work at is going to be short-staffed since I'm *temporarily* incapacitated. I can give you my boss's number, and maybe she could give you a job. She's very understanding and has been looking for another employee anyhow."

It only took a phone call the following morning to secure the job, Grandma's boss - Margot - very eager to have a young, spry worker on hand. She was a little hesitant since I was fourteen and had never had a job before, but since I was just helping out with cleaning, moving flowers and maybe helping out at the cash register when they were really low on staff, it was easy enough to pick up.

I found that working wasn't too bad - sure, I was usually already tired after school, leaving me completely drained by the time I got home, but it was satisfying. Getting my first paycheck left me glowing for days, especially when I used it to buy our groceries for the first time. Bell didn't seem to mind me working as much since I always came home smiling.

There was only one time I didn't come home smiling, however. It was a Wednesday, the day I had fudged my way through a maths test that I was sure I failed. That didn't bum me out too much - I was never good at maths (or school in general), but I scraped by. It was what happened at work that left me feeling sick in the stomach.

I had been watering some of the peonies at the front of the store when I heard the bell above the door chime. Plastering my service smile on my face, one that wasn't actually fake in the slightest, I turned.

"Hello, welcome to High Street Flowers, how can I-"

"Hey, bud."

Harvey Gallo. Papa. *Dad* .

"Oh," I said, smile immediately dropping from my face. "Dad."

"Yeah," the ageing man said, chuckling awkwardly. He had aged a lot since I had last seen him, which was maybe half a year ago. That meeting was a bad idea on all accounts; mum and dad had attempted to organise a 'family outing', for some reason wanting to reunite our happy little family. I knew mum wanted the three of us to meet because her gold-digging ass got dumped by her latest partner (a lawyer with a penthouse suite, apparently). Dad, on the other hand, wanted to show that he was doing better than ever without her. He had shaved, bought a new bespoke suit and used cologne to hide the smell of alcohol clinging to his skin.

Mum hadn't bought his little show for a second, so with that plan of attack a failure, he tried to use me to one up his ex-wife. He knew I never saw her, knew I didn't even want to speak with her whenever she had a new fling and tried to pitch moving in with her by bragging about their luxury car, condo or holiday house. So he used that; he played up that he knew more about me than she did, asking me about my friends or bringing up how my football team won the championships.

He just neglected to mention that it was from two years ago, because he had no clue what I was up to these days.

I was done with them, but they weren't done with me, because they weren't done with hurting each other.

"Inviting me to another lovely family dinner?" I asked, voice icy. Dad laughed, the noise short. "What will it be this time? French cuisine? Chinese didn't seem to go down too well last time, especially not when the dumplings started getting thrown around."

"Ha," dad managed to cough out, scratching his beard, a nervous gesture I had picked up on years ago. "That's not what I came here for."

"What then? I'm pretty busy, we're short-staffed today," I said, glancing at the un-manned cash register, even though I knew Margot was in the back just grabbing some new tissue paper for the bouquets.

"Right. Well, um, I know that you and... your grandmother are in a bit of a tough spot at the moment," dad started, and I had to swallow back a scoff. "You're working because you're struggling with money, right? Well, if you come live with me, then you wouldn't have to worry about any of that. I've got plenty of money to pay your tuition, and can send you to a far better school than the one you're at right now. And you wouldn't have to work at all, you can just, I don't know, hang out with your friends. Your Grandma could also take it easy as well, not having to worry about looking after you."

Until he said the last part, I hadn't given two tosses about his proposal. Until that, he was just spewing the same bullshit as mum, trying to win me over with shiny cars and big houses, though this time they were actually owned by him. But he was right; moving back in with him would relieve some of the burden on Grandma, and wasn't that why I started working in the first place?

But... moving into his big house that he never slept in anyway, trying to talk to a father who was too inebriated to care?

I didn't want that.

But I wanted to help Grandma.

Dad could tell that I was on the fence. That his fishing line had a *bite* , the hook piercing my cheek. He would just have to tug on that line *just right* , and I would be out of the water.

Suffocating.

Dying.

"I'll have to think about it," I said quickly, shutting him up before he could tug on the line. Putting down the watering can with a clatter, I wiped my sweaty hands on my apron, looking towards the cash register. "Look, I'm really busy. I'll call you when I... decide."

"Sounds good, bud," dad said, elated. Before leaving, he reached into his wallet and pulled out a wad of bright yellow fifty-dollar notes. Pocket money, he called it.

I called it a bribe.

Bait.

He was gone before I grew a mind to give it back.

And I hated it when I shoved the money into my pocket. I hated accepting anything from that man. It felt like he was winning, even though I wanted no part of the sick game he was playing. I'm not even sure that I was a player; he and mum were the athletes, and I was the busted ball being kicked around the empty field.

When I got home, Bell in the middle of her nightly stretches in the living room to the background sounds of Elvis's dulcet tones, I couldn't bring myself to fake a smile. Not that I could in front of her anyway.

"Jeez, who complained that the tulips were too wilted today?" Bell asked, taking in my face. My mouth quirked up a little at that, and I collapsed onto the couch behind my grandma.

"It wasn't the tulips today," I said hesitantly, grandma's brow rising. "Um, dad came to the store today."

"Oh," Grandma said simply, pausing mid-stretch. "I was hoping it would be the roses."

"Yeah, I would've preferred the roses too," I snorted, reaching into my pocket to pull out the wad of cash dad had given me earlier. It was $300 exact, much more than I was making at the flower shop.

"Who the hell did you rob, Nicolas," Bell joked, leaning back into another stretch position, groaning as it tugged on her back. "Apart from giving you money, what else did he say? I think I can take a guess, but who knows, I could be wrong."

"He wanted me to come live with him," I shrugged, and Bell hummed.

"See, I'm always right," Bell said, wiggling her eye brows. "And what did you say?"

"I... told him I'd think about it."

Grandma was silent as she considered my words, faltering in her stretch. She soon straightened up, looking at me seriously.

"Maybe I'm not always right, then," Bell said, sighing. Lowering herself next to me, she patted my knee. "Is there a reason why you're thinking about it? You've made it clear before that you don't want to live with him, so this change is... unexpected."

"It's not that I *want* to," I said, biting my lip. "I want to stay here, with you, but... but it would be easier if I stayed with dad, right?" Grandma seemed to know exactly where this conversation was going, and rolled her eyes, throwing her hands up in the air.

"Bullshit!" Grandma exclaimed, and I let out a surprised laugh at her language, which she didn't employ often. "Like hell it would be easier!"

"But-"

"Do you know how *empty* this house is when you're not here?" Grandma asked, gesturing around the room. "Well, it's really empty. This house is not

the same without you in it, and even for a gracefully ageing lady like me, living in a house that feels empty is hard. Yes, money is a little tight at the moment, but your grandma can do downward dog without flinching so she's going to be back to work in no time!" I opened my mouth to say something, but Grandma shook her head, voice softening.

"Nicolas, the way you've been talking, you make it sound like you're a burden. But that's simply *bullshit*, okay? I love having you here, and, if you think the same, I would love to keep having you here. This is your home as much as mine."

My heart swelled almost to bursting, and I could feel my eyes grow hot, my throat constricting as the river of feelings I had been trying to contain battered at the levees I'd built up in my chest. Sucking in a breath, forcing my tears to stay, I nodded.

"I want that too," I whispered, voice cracking at the end. Sniffling, I smiled properly. "I'll call dad and tell him that him and his bullshit can get lost."

"Hey! Language, mister!" Grandma scolded, giving me a playful slap on my arm. "But call him, and then we can make dinner together."

"Risotto?" I asked, Bell chuckling.

"Risotto."

Thirteen Years Ago

Isn't it great being the new kid.

Moving schools was never fun, especially in Year 9. There was usually an influx of new kids in Year 7, when people moved from primary school to senior school, but not many at my age. There was only one other new kid this year, and he had apparently gone to this primary school for a few years before moving, but now that he was back he still knew some people around.

I, on the other hand, knew no one.

That wasn't too different from my last school, though. Since year 7, I had been alone; I was busy with work, and friends from primary school couldn't relate and started to drift away. I was too apathetic to even care, more concerned with making money and getting through the school day without dozing off. By the time I was 14, I didn't really have any friends, and for some reason people started staying away from me.

Maybe it was the piercings. Or the fact that I didn't give a shit about anyone at all. I'm sure this school was going to be the same.

I kept my hands stuffed in my pockets as I was shown around the school by some short guy in my homeroom, his voice too mousy and timid to keep my attention. I could feel people staring and whispering as I walked past, making me roll my eyes. I had been doing that a lot since I came here, and the fact that the kid showing me around kept stuttering wasn't helping.

By the time we got back to our homeroom, I had grown completely tired of his nervous chatter, ignoring him to go sit at the back of the classroom to wait for the first class to start. Choosing the seat by the window so I'd at least have a view to distract myself with, I actively ignored the curious looks from my classmates, who like always, stayed away.

Whatever.

"Damn, you got the best seat in the house."

The voice was close, and I could feel its owner pulling the chair beside me. Turning disinterestedly, I saw a tall boy with shortly cropped hair and sharp hazel eyes. Athletic. He had a close-lipped smile on his face that seemed calculating, like he was sizing me up.

"Not my problem if others were too slow," I said slowly, shrugging. The guy's smile widened, showing picket-straight teeth.

"You new here?" he asked, and I snorted.

"Is it that obvious?"

"Kind of. There are only two new people this year, and I've never seen you around before." He paused, looking at the spot I'm sitting in. "And people who have been around know that this is *my* spot."

"Sorry, I didn't see your name on it," I said, leaning back in my chair, making it clear that I had no intention of moving any time soon. The guy just laughed, a little surprise in its tone. Stretching out his hand, the guy tilted his head to the side, curious.

"It's all good. First come, first served. I'm Isaac."

"Nico," I replied, taking his hand. His handshake was firm, and again I felt like he was sizing me up. From the way he spoke and held himself, coupled with clearly expensive watch he was wearing, I figured he was one of the elites in this school, or at least, in our grade. Did he expect me to bow down to him or something? Because like hell I'd ever allow myself to give in to someone else.

So I squeezed his hand right back, the guy's eyes filling up with delight.

"You know what? I think you'll do alright here, Nico."

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From that point onwards, it wasn't an uncommon sight to see a certain trio hanging around the back of the school. Even though they were only ninth graders, older kids knew not to mess with them. Isaac was their school captain's younger brother, budding football star and already had a bank account that put their parents's to shame. Colin was the guy that looked like he had hit his growth spurt early, and that it wouldn't be ending for the next 150 years. He already towered over some of the Year 12 students, and the fact that someone had seen him apparently hulk out in P.E. class one time gave him a certain reputation. From afar, I knew why people had that image of him, but Isaac and I knew he was probably the most harmless of the three of us.

It was nice, hanging out when the two of them. Friends, I guess, were nice. By manner of association, I had gone from the apparent nothing of my
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previous school to one of the most well-known students at this one. Isaac had roped me into joining the football team as a casual player, though I made it clear I didn't have time for extracurriculars. Even though I wasn't there for most trainings, the coach still shoved me on the A team since I could out-kick most of the upper classmen. Isaac had also mentioned that most of the female population at the school also wanted to sleep with me, which wasn't damaging to my image at all. Apparently, a chunk of the male population wanted the same thing, which Isaac made snide comments about every now and then.

That was very much like Isaac, though. With him, it was about sex or sport, or whatever kid he needed to teach a lesson because they looked at him sideways. It had been after the winter holidays that Isaac came up to Colin and I, smirk on his face and chest puffed out. Isaac pulled out a packet of cigarettes his older brother bought us, lighting two up for me and himself, Colin passing on it as he always did.

"Have something to tell us?" I asked, taking a drag. I didn't smoke often, only when Isaac offered me one, but I had gradually grown to get used to the taste, and find that it kept my hands busy. It was strangely soothing, seeing the grey smoke plume out when I exhaled, and how warm I felt when I breathed in. Cancer, whatever. What fifteen-almost-sixteen-year-old gets lung cancer.

"Okay, you know that hot brunette chick in Year 10?" Isaac asked, and I shook my head. "You know, the friend of that girl I told you about last week. The blonde with the huge boobs."

"Oh, so the friend of the one that *didn't* want to sleep with you," I clarified, grinning when Isaac flipped me off.

"Anyway, I nailed the brunette last night," Isaac said, exhaling smoke through his nose.

"Good for you," I said, Isaac slapping my shoulder.

"I haven't seen you with anyone, Nico," Isaac mused, moving to sit on the backrest of the wooden bench Colin and I sat on. His eyes looked at mine

through the smoke, probing, like they were the first time I met him. "You're not one of those butt fuckers are you?"

I snorted at his words, exhaling through my nose.

"Why? You curious?" I asked, smirking. "Didn't think I was your type. I know you prefer blondes."

"Shut up, asshole," Isaac said, shivering and pushing my shoulders. Isaac dropped the subject, moving on to talk about this other girl from the year above that he wanted to bang. I only half listened to his chatter, but clued in enough to wonder if sex was really as good as he made it out to be. It was hard to form my own opinions since I hadn't tried it with anyone other than my own hand before.

"Oh, it's blondie, by the caf," Isaac said, whistling quietly. I flicked my eyes upwards, spotting the blonde (who really did have huge boobs) and her brunette friend. Sensing our gazes on them, the girls looked at each other, giggling amongst themselves, before turning back to us. The blonde's eyes met mine, and she gave me a small wave, lower lip caught between her teeth.

So, later that day I slept with her. Had sex. Fucked. And it was fun.

But maybe Isaac was overselling it a bit.

Twelve Years Ago

Isaac's brother has a friend who is a tattoo artist, and a pretty decent one too. He had just finished his apprenticeship, but didn't have many clients as he was still fresh in the shop, so he had offered to give us free tattoos as long as he could post them online to try and get his work out there. He didn't give a damn that we were only 16 and under age - 'the pics won't have your faces, anyway'.

I had wanted tattoos for a while. There was a girl from school that I had slept with that had some tattoos scattered across her body, some in places that hadn't been seen by many other people. I had been intrigued, finding

the art a little hot, even though one of her tattoos had been a pretty shitty caricature of some singer she liked.

It wasn't long after that when I found myself lying supine on a fold-out bench at Isaac's house getting tattooed. Bell's favourite flowers - rosemallows, or hibiscus flowers - on the left of my chest. Isaac had ribbed me about it being girly, but the look I fixed him and my curt 'it's for my grandma' had shut him up very, very fast. Yeah, maybe it was a bit more delicate than the weird wolf-tiger hybrid thing that he got on his arm, but it meant something to me. And who the fuck cared anyway - flowers were flowers, it didn't matter if I was a guy or a girl.

The tattoo hurt, but I powered through it, barely batting an eye. Colin had sat there thoughout the day, watching us get our tattoos, but didn't want any for himself. He had said that he didn't want to get one now; he wanted to think about it. Isaac thought that was hilarious, since Colin never seemed to think about much at all. This was something that I found myself surprised and impressed with from time-to-time; for someone that seemed so happy-go-lucky about everything, he was pretty level-headed. He balanced Isaac and I out, I supposed.

"And we're done," the tattoo artist - Mikhail - said, nodding with appreciation with his work. "You heard all the aftercare shit I told Isaac, so I won't bother repeating it. I'll just take some pictures, wrap it up and you'll be good to go."

"Thanks," I said, peering at the flowers blooming across my chest in the mirror. They looked good, the ink dark and crisp, the skin just a little red around the area.

"Shame I can't get your face in the picture," Mikhail said, taking a few pictures on his phone at different angles. "Your face would probably get my post way more hits."

"What about my face, you dick?" Isaac said, chuckling. "Not pretty enough for you?"

"Not even going to go there, Mini Masters," Mikhail snickered, sticking his tongue out at his friend's younger brother. Isaac flipped him off, Mikhail telling him to be careful with his freshly tatted arm with a teasing grin.

Mikhail hung around for a little while longer, until Isaac's brother came back and the two of them went out for a drink. The three of us ordered pizza and played CoD while we ate, before I headed home.

Bell was waiting for me at the front door, arms crossed and finger tapping on her arm. Eyeing the plastic peeking out from my collar, Bell looked at me, waiting for an explanation. A jolt of nerves hit me for the first time in a while, and I rubbed the back of my head sheepishly.

"I did text you about it," I offered, my grandma scoffing and slapping me on the back of my head.

"Yeah, *after* you got it done," Bell chastised, pulling my shirt to the side to eye the work. "You're only 16, Nicolas. Tattoos are illegal, you know."

"That's why I got it on my chest. It'll be a bit easier to cover up. And I'm almost 17, it'll be fine in a year and a bit."

"Still illegal," Bell said, frowning as she looked the design up and down. I could see her disapproval beginning to wane as she registered what it was, a little colour tickling her complexion.

"Like the design though, Gran?" I said, smirking. Bell rolled her eyes, pulling my shirt back up.

"At least it's not a penis."

Eleven Years Ago

"This has gone on for far too long, Mr Beckett," Principal Meyers said gruffly, slamming his palm atop a pile of papers on his desk. A koala bobble head on his desk wobbled as the whole desk shook. I blinked, blatantly unimpressed by his attempt at asserting his dominance.

"Abysmal attendance, acting up in class, disrespecting teachers and physical bullying," Meyers listed, sardonic smile on his face. "I could go on, and on, but we would be here all evening."

"You wound me. I thought you *love* my company, Principal," I said, smiling. "Considering you're always calling me in here, you know, to spend some quality time together."

"Don't test me, kid," Meyers snarled, slamming his hand against the desk again, the thump echoing around the room.

"Oh, no, I wouldn't dare. Testing isn't my job," I said, leaning back in the chair and starting to rock back and forth. I snatched up the ugly koala bobble head, flicking at its face with my fingers.

"Apparently taking them isn't your job either," Meyers continued, pulling out some papers from his pile and throwing them towards me. "We don't expect a lot from you, but this is just unacceptable!"

"As you've told me the other six times you've called me in here the past semester," I said, pushing my weight forward, the chair crashing to a stand still.

"Yes, and clearly, we can't expect someone like *you* to clean up their act and be a decent person. So, we're holding you back a year."

" *What* ?"

"You heard me," Meyers said, voice smug as he eyed me. "You've missed too many hours, and you'd completely flunk all of your exams at this rate, so you're staying back. You're going to get your shit together, go to classes, actually take the tests. If you do anything out of line, then it's your ass on the line."

"Maybe that's what I want," I seethed, getting up from my chair. Crushing Meyer's stupid koala bobble-head on the desk, the force making his lamp rattle precariously. "To get out of this shit hole, run by assholes like you."

Who determine my future before it even starts.

"Hmph. We'll pick this up again, Beckett," Meyers said, leaning back, satisfied by getting a rise out of me. I gripped the edge of his desk, knuckles white, trying to reel in my anger. " *Next year* ."

Spitting, I walked out of his room, making sure to slam the door behind me. I glared at the shocked receptionist as I stormed past, fingers digging into the palm of my hand.

Turning the corner abruptly, anger flaring inside, I bumped harshly into a boy. He was far smaller and less muscular than me, and while I didn't stagger in the slightest, the boy stumbled backwards. His back collided with a row of lockers but he didn't make a noise, just scrunched up his face in a brief moment of pain.

Readjusting his glasses and pushing some of his obviously bleached blonde hair from his face, he looked up. Eyes widened behind glass, and he immediately dropped his gaze.

"Ah! S-Sorry," a meek voice stammered. I rolled my eyes at the way he hunched over himself, so tiny and weak. I had seen this kid, from the year below me, around the place. He was basically a teacher's pet, a suck-up, a goody two-shoes with a brain.

I let out an unamused snort, brushing past him and heading out of the school.

I was late for work.

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"I haven't had my break yet," I pushed through my teeth, Daryl giving me an incredulous look.

"Does it look like I care?" he said, jerking a pudgy hand towards the front of the restaurant. "We have a full house, and it's not my fault that you've
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been slacking. Go wait tables, and then maybe when the rush is over you can have your break. Unless you don't want to get paid this week."

Fuck you.

"Fine," I said, saving the profanity for my head, shovelling some plates onto my arms and bringing them to the front. I fixed Oscar a heated glare as he stood there chatting to one of the chefs instead of waiting his tables like he was supposed to.

"Is there a reason why our food took so long to get here?" a man at the table snapped, and I gave him my best apologetic smile, blurting out rehearsed lines about how we are short-staffed and that the kitchen is doing its utmost to get the food out at a rapid pace. The man grumbled, before ordering another glass of wine, probably one of many considering his already red complexion. His date didn't bother to veil her disgust as she looked at him, before quietly thanking me for bringing the meal.

At least some people are decent, for fuck's sake.

Taking some of the dirty plates from another table back to the kitchen, I internally groaned when I felt a draft of heated summer air waft into the air-conditioned room as the door opened. I didn't want to deal with any more customers, not right now.

"Oscar, get your ass out there and do your fucking job," I hissed as I walked past him, dumping the dishes into the sink. Oscar scoffed, continuing to check messages from his girlfriend-that-I-apparently-fucked, ignoring me. A vein in my forehead throbbed, the last of my silken thread of patience snapping.

Grabbing Oscar by the back of his shirt, I pulled him into the male bathroom and shoving him into the door of a cubicle, the boy swearing as he tripped and fell on his ass.

"I've been playing nice, but you're getting on my last fucking nerve. I told you last time that you'd be going through the wall if you pull this shit again," I growled, grabbing him by his collar, eyes wild. "I've been having a

bad day, so who knows what I'll do. You want to try it out?" My hands on his shirt tightened, impinging on his throat, which moved as he shook his head with fear.

"No," Oscar choked, wheezing. "L-Let go."

"Only if you promise to do your fucking job," I said, hoisting him up, grip digging into his skin.

"P-Promise," Oscar said, spluttering when I dropped him.

"Good," I said, sucking in a deep breath and running my fingers through my hair. "I heard some people just walk in, go and seat them and do what you're getting paid to do."

Oscar didn't reply, scuttling out of the room to do his job. Sauntering over to the sinks, I splashed my face to clear my head, before looking into the mirror. Like most people, the first thing I saw was my lip ring. Then the slight slither of black peeking out from the collar of my white shirt. I could see the anger in my eyes, the hard set lines of my mouth. Looking down, I could see the rough skin over my knuckles, no longer smooth after being scabbed over numerous times in fights.

This isn't all of me.

But no one can see that.

Drying my face with a paper towel, I went back out, hoping that Daryl hadn't noticed that I was missing for a little while. I smirked slightly when I saw Oscar keeping himself busy, taking the orders of the two people that had entered just earlier. They were a girl and a boy, a couple maybe. The girl had dark brown hair and warm eyes, and anyone could see that she was pretty. She wore tight-fitting clothes that showed off quite a bit of her slightly tanned skin, but she exuded confidence as she chatted with her date.

I was surprised when I saw a familiar mop of bleach blonde hair, glasses and tentative brown eyes. Teacher's pet.

Oscar finished taking their orders, not looking at me as he darted past. I watched the blonde kid curiously, at the big smile on his face as he talked to the girl opposite him. They didn't look like they were on a date - it was not possible for someone that meek to look so comfortable holding a conversation with a girl like that. Brother and sister, maybe?

It was as I was contemplating this that the red-faced man from the table next door, breath definitely reeking of wine, got up from his chair. His date was, strangely, not at the table - I hoped that she had managed to sneak out, since her date was definitely a scumbag and she could honestly do better.

The blonde boy's eyes flickered up when he felt the man waltz up to them, and I saw him kick his sister in the leg under the table. He stopped beside the brown-haired girl, gaze lecherous and raking over her upper body. From his vantage point, he probably got a nice look down her low-cut top, and he licked his chapped lips in appreciation.

"Hey there," he said, voice a little slurred. The brunette's face was unamused as she looked up, reeling back a little as she saw the man beside her. He began leaning on the table, towering over her. Like I thought, he couldn't have smelled too good, considering the barely disguised gag the girl let out. Unfortunately, the drunkard was too wasted to notice.

"No thanks," the girl said, voice clipped. Turning back to her brother with a 'can you believe this' look in her eyes, and made it a point to focus on anything other than the man currently drooling down her cleavage.

"Aw, don't be like that, baby," the man chuckled, reaching forward to flick some of her hair over her shoulder. The girl jumped away, disgust written plainly across her features.

"Don't touch me, what the hell is wrong with you," the girl said, getting up from her chair, the napkin on her lap falling to the ground. The blonde boy followed her to his feet, stepping between her and the drunkard.

"Oh, please," the drunk man guffawed, stepping forward with a lurch, knocking over one of the glasses on the table. "You're dressed like *that* , don't tell me you're not asking for it."

"How I dress is none of your business," the girl said, but uncomfortably tugged on the hem of her tight dress despite herself. *Tough girl, though.*

What was more surprising, however, was that the nerdy blonde kid gently yet firmly tugged on the girl to stand behind him, blocking her from the path of the drunkard. His eyes that had looked at me so timidly were narrowed, and his pink lips pressed themselves tightly together, his body taught. Defensive. Determined.

"Baby, you know that's not true," the drunk continued, licking his lips again. "You don't wear a dress like that, showing off all of that skin and not want it." Turning to the blonde boy, the man took a moment to look him up and down before smiling mockingly, apparently not seeing much there at all. The blonde boy's cheeks were painted red, and his dark eye brows pinched in the middle. Some of the other diners looked on, some scared, others annoyed, but none making a move to intervene. I glanced around, and it didn't seem like any of the staff were keen to deal with that, Oscar the least of all.

"I dress like this because I want to, and even if I wanted people to look, I have standards and you, sir, certainly do *not* meet them," the girl retorted, arms crossed over her chest. The drunkard's movements ceased as his alcohol-addled brain comprehended what she had said. When things had clicked, his whole body grew livid.

Oh shit, punches are about to be thrown.

Looking around at my coworkers again, I groaned, stepping forwards. Beginning to make my way over, since no one else - not even the boss - seemed to be making any attempt to do so, I watched the drunk man push over a chair to get closer to the duo.

"You little bitch," the man seethed, the boy and girl stepping backwards stiffly, the blonde's arm still outstretched to shield the girl. "Look at you, thinking you can talk to me like that, when all you are is a pathetic slut who-"

"Hey! Don't talk to my sister that way you asshole!" the blonde suddenly yelled, his voice surprisingly loud, not wavering despite the way his sister grabbed onto his arm with trepidation. "You don't get to judge her, you don't even know her! She can dress and look however she wants, because I know that there's more to her that what you so short-sightedly see! *She's worth so much more!* "

What.

I found my steps faltering. Something about his words struck me right in the chest. I didn't know if it was the words themselves, or the conviction in the voice that said them, or the expression on the boy's face as he spoke them.

Who is he?

"You little shit, I'm gonna kill you-" the drunkard yelled, arm swinging.

"Watch out, Wes!" the girl yelled, the boy's eyes growing wide as he and his sister jerked backwards. The punch missed them completely, the drunkard yelping as he dripped on his own feet, crashing to the floor in a heap. I felt some of my coworkers finally beginning to move, stepping around me frantically to haul the drunkard to his feet, the man cursing and struggling as she dragged him outside.

"You okay, Wes?" the girl said frantically, spinning her brother around to get a good look at him. The boy's face had changed completely once again, a shaky smile on his mouth, eyes looking like an animal that just narrowly missed getting hit by a car.

"Yeah, I'm okay, I think," he said, laughing nervously. "I... I think we should just get pizza and eat at home instead, though."

"Ugh, I totally agree. I'm done with people for the rest of the night. We only just ordered, I'll go tell someone to cancel that," the girl said, the blonde nodding. I watched from afar as the boy awkwardly gathered their things from the table, frowning when he saw his phone dripping with water from when the drunkard had knocked over his glass.

Maybe it'll be alright with him.

I didn't have time to think about the words that whispered themselves into my head, Daryl walking up to me with a frustrated look on his features.

"Nico, go and clean up that mess over there. Bloody lost some customers because of that drunk," he spat, giving me a hard glare when I didn't move. "Didn't you hear me, boy? Go clean the table up, or else you won't be seeing your pay this week-"

"Fuck you," I said, Daryl spluttering.

" *Excuse* me-"

"Yeah, fuck you, Daryl," I said, untying the apron around my waist and shoving it into his hands. "I quit."

"You can't just quit!"

Oh, yes I can. I can because *I'm worth so much more.*

***' The'* Day - Part II**

I had soon drifted off to sleep after Wes, but woke up before he did. His back was moulded into my chest, our legs tangled together. Pulling him in tightly, my boy mumbling sleepily and snuggling closer, I smiled into his hair. Even though he had woken up earlier than me before as he always did, he was clearly tired. I couldn't help the satisfied feeling settling into my gut, knowing that it was because of what we had done last night.

Slipping down slightly to press a kiss to the back of Wes's neck, I chuckled when the boy's hand splayed itself over the one I had pressed across his stomach.

"Awake, babe?" I whispered, voice gravelly with sleep, and Wes let out a sleepy sigh.

"Of course I am," he grumbled, pulling my arm to hold him tighter. "Hard to sleep when I can feel your boner pressing against my ass." I laughed

breathily at his words, which were still layered with sleep but stimulating all the same. Before I could press my hips up to rub my growing hard on against him, Wes pushed his ass back into my crotch, grinding slightly. I could feel Wes let out an affected breath on the skin of my arm that was propped under the curve of his neck, groaning.

"And here I was, thinking you were tired," I teased, my words breathless as Wes wriggled his ass against my erection that was definitely tenting in my briefs. Shifting slightly, I marvelled at the long moan Wes let escape from his mouth when the slight change in angle made my cock slot into the crevice of his ass.

"Oh, fuck, you're really hard," Wes breathed out, lacing his fingers with mine and resting them on his stomach, which contracted and relaxed every time I thrust against him, the friction making pre-cum soak into my briefs.

"Only because you're so fucking hot," I replied, kissing and nibbling at Wes's neck over a spot I had carefully marked the night before. It must have been sensitive, because I heard a sharp intake of breath as Wes's hand tightened around mine, guiding it downwards.

"Please, Nico," Wes pleaded, my fingers tugging on the waistband of his briefs and pulling them down. The fabric, slightly damp, bunched up around his thighs, allowing me to press closer to the crack of his rounded ass.

"God, I love you," I whispered reverently against his skin, Wes shuddering. By grinding into Wes's ass my own briefs had slowly slipped downwards, my now achingly hard and dripping cock sliding free from the fabric. Both Wes and I groaned in tandem as my bare dick jerked against his ass, slick and slippery. Wes whimpered when the head of my cock rubbed against his bruised rim, his body trembling. Like his neck, I was sure his ass was still tender after last night, so I had no plans on entering him this morning.

We'll see about tonight, though.

"I love you too," Wes gasped, my hand simultaneously wrapping around his hard member. His cock was already slippery with pre-cum, twitching in my

hand when I ran my thumb over its leaking slit. "So much. I love you so much," Wes said again, voice slowly coming undone.

"I know, babe." I pumped his cock in rhythm with my thrusts in the dip of his ass, Wes pressing his mouth to my arm to try and muffle his moans.

Even now, he's so fucking perfect.

It didn't take much longer for both of us to come, Wes spilling over my hand with a cry, his whole body trembling with the force of his orgasm. A few thrust later I came against the curve of Wes's ass, cum splurting across his back.

Chuckling against Wes's hair, I gave his cock one last, playful tug which coaxed a whine from Wes's mouth.

"Good morning again, babe."

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"Don't blame me, Nico," Wes huffed, sitting on the bathroom counter as he squirted toothpaste onto his brush before jamming it into his mouth. Brushing vigorously and then spitting, Wes continued. "You're the one that got distracted in the shower."

"Lies," I said, rolling my eyes as I shaved beside him. "You were the one who got on his knees and-"

"I dropped the loofah!"

"And somehow got my dick in your mouth while retrieving it?" I finished, Wes's cheeks blushing beautifully.

"That was an unexpected complication," he huffed, rinsing his mouth out before turning back to me. "And you better stop thinking about your dick being in my mouth if you want to get to *your* restaurant's grand opening on time."
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"You know, you're calling it grand opening but it's basically just a regular dinner with everyone. It just happens to be in my restaurant that is officially opening tomorrow."

"Doesn't mean you can be late, Nico," Wes said, pressing a quick kiss on my cheek before disappearing back into our bedroom to get changed.

After making sure that he wasn't going to burst into the bathroom, his humming evidence of that, I hastily rummaged around to the back of the bottom bathroom drawer that we never used. Beneath a pile of random items, I pulled out a sleek velvet box, the tiny thing heavy in my hands.

Today was 'The' day.

No big deal.

"Nico! What are you doing in there? Hurry up!" Wes called out, making me jump, almost dropping the box into the toilet. Cursing quietly, I stuffed the box into my pocket, stilling my frantic heart before speaking.

"Sorry! I was just busy thinking about my dick in your mouth!" I called out, my words followed by the sound of something dropping onto the floor and a muttered curse.

"Shut up!"

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"I can't wait to *finally* be able to see your restaurant," Wes said, rolling his eyes slightly. "Considering how secretive you were about it, I really started to think that something shady was going on."

"I just wanted it to be a surprise," I replied, laughing. Taking Wes's hand in mine, I guided him into the restaurant. It still smelled like fresh paint and new furniture, but from the kitchen there was already the smell of food being prepared.

I watched Wes carefully as he looked around, taking all of my hard work in. My heart swelled as I saw his mouth slowly creep up into a smile, pride and
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awe shining in his eyes.

"It's amazing, Nico," Wes said gently, his words so honest as they wrapped around my heart and squeezed. "Really, I'm so proud of you."

"Thanks, Wes," I said, trying to suppress the way my voice sounded raw, squeezing Wes's hand tightly. Seeing him looking at me with those eyes that just screamed that they loved me, I began to feel nervous for the first time since I planned this whole thing.

Damn it. This is not the time to freak out, Nico.

The boxed ring in my pocket felt like it was stabbing into me, its existence far too present for me to focus on much else. Wes didn't seem to notice how my hands slowly became clammy, or how I kept nervously glancing towards the kitchen.

There was a small open window between the seating area and the kitchen, allowing diners to see part of how the food was prepared. Two of the assistant chefs I had hired waved, knowing smiles on their faces but otherwise not giving away that they weren't the only ones in the kitchen. With his back turned to the kitchen, Wes didn't notice the group of heads popping up through the window. A hand suddenly thrust itself up in a thumbs up gesture, before disappearing back down when another hand slapped it - the first looked a lot like Benny's, the second like Jamie's.

"What does the restaurant's name mean, though?" Wes asked, pointing to the writing on the wall. *Il Regalo.*

"It's a long story," I said, smiling slightly. "Want to hear it?"

"Oh, I've got time," Wes said, turning to face me fully, playful grin on his face, looking so at ease in this space I made while thinking of him.

At least one of us isn't about to shit ourselves.

"Well, I guess we should start at the very beginning, then," I said, stepping closer to Wes. I actively ignored the double thumbs up darting up from the

kitchen - hands that big had to be Colin's. Wes looked at me in confusion, silently urging me to continue.

Focus, Nico. Focus.

Be romantic.

Damn it.

Just look at Wes. Oh, no. Fuck, he's so beautiful.

"Okay. I guess the beginning is from 10, almost 11 years ago, when a boy who was really, really wasted stumbled into me. Literally," I said, Wes's mouth dropping open, cheeks hot. "He was really stubborn, and I'm pretty sure he hated me for a bit, but I chased after him anyway because I had fallen in love with him. With his stupidly bleached hair, and the way his mouth was never honest but his beautiful face would say everything it wouldn't. Like now," I said, brushing my thumb over Wes's flaming cheeks tenderly, my boyfriend-almost-fiance-hopefully-soon-to-be-husband's eyes widening. Chocolatey-brown irises shone molten bronze under the dangling lights, and I couldn't look at anything else.

"I fell in love with a boy who makes me a better person, who sometimes I feel like I'm not good enough for but always reminds me that I'm worthy. And I want to be better for this boy, because I love him, so much that I just..."

"Nico, what are you saying," Wes whispered, voice shaken and overcome.

"I fell in love with *you* ," I said firmly, Wes unable to hold back the emotional laugh that tumbled from his mouth. "And I keep falling in love with you, every day, with everything you do. I want to keep falling in love with you, tomorrow and every day after it."

"Nico..."

"So, babe," I said, dropping to one knee, Wes's hands flying to his mouth with a startled gasp. Pulling out the box from my pocket, praising whatever

deity was watching over me now that I didn't drop it, I sucked in a deep breath, suddenly not nervous at all.

Because Wes was looking at me like *that* .

And I knew he was going to say yes.

Opening the box to reveal a simple silver band, I asked the man I loved a question I already knew the answer to.

"Will you marry me?"

Wes was at a loss for words for a moment, his breath stopping completely as his eyes flickered between the ring and my face. Then, slowly, his head bobbed up and down.

"Yes," Wes whispered, barely audible. But I heard it. I would always hear it.

Getting up from my knee, I gingerly took Wes's hand in mine, kissing his fingers before sliding the ring onto his left hand.

"I think I'm going to pass out," Wes said, voice cracking. I couldn't help but laugh at his words, pulling him towards me to press a kiss to his mouth. My *fiance's* mouth. Wes melted in my arms, throwing his arms around my neck as he cried into the kiss, and I didn't think my heart could feel any more full.

I didn't even notice the cheers coming from the kitchen, not when Wes was in my arms, murmuring 'I love you's' against my skin and in my heart.

"Pop open the champagne, family!" Jamie yelled, a chorus of cheers erupting from around us, finally causing Wes and I to pull back from each other, but only slightly. Bell was standing there with tears in her eyes, hands tightly holding a handkerchief over her mouth. Wes's mum was beside her, beaming and with her hand pressed to her heart. Benny was clapping wildly with Colin's arm draped loosely over his shoulders, my closest friend giving me an approving grin. Jamie was busy pouring champagne into a line of

glasses, though she spilled quite a bit since she was having a hard time seeing through the tears she was so blatantly ignoring.

A tug on my shirt pulled my wandering eyes back to Wes, who rubbed at his eyes while smiling up at me. With his hands on my chest, Wes spoke, voice soft.

"You never got to the part where you tell me the meaning of the restaurant's name," he said, making me hum in response.

"Well, you see..."

The name of the restaurant had come easily all those days ago, when I first decided to open it. There had been no doubt in my mind.

Il Regalo.

The gift.

Because I never thought I'd have this. A seven-year-old me had crossed out number 10 on his Christmas wishlist, because he thought that, even with all the magic in the world, he would never get it. *To be loved.*

But he did, and it was more than he could ever ask for.